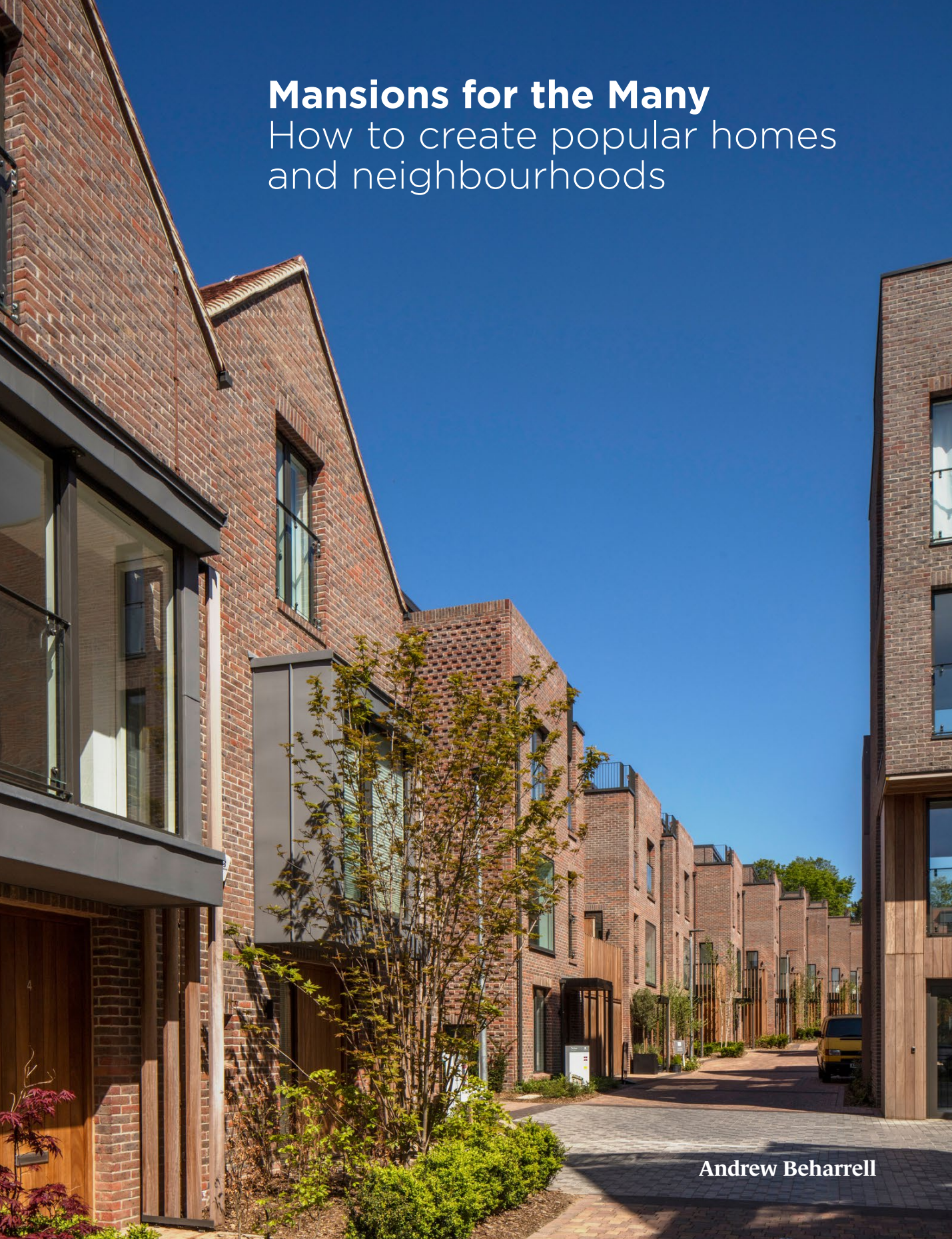
Mansions for the Many

How to create popular homes and neighbourhoods



Andrew Beharrell

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If I must choose just one legacy project, it would be Woodside Square. It's near my home, I walk past it most weeks, in all weathers and all seasons, and it always lifts my spirits.

Introduction

This is the story of 40 years of housing design and development in the UK, starting in 1984 when I joined the architectural practice Pollard Thomas Edwards, and ending with the practice's 50th anniversary in 2024. I stepped back from PTE and the business of architecture in 2020 to focus on writing and design review.

My story interweaves projects with writing. It has a strong focus on London, but also features work in Liverpool, Cambridge, England's southern counties and Scotland. Although the writing is entirely my own, the projects are of course the outcome of teamwork, and I have tried to name key collaborators throughout the text and in the closing credits. Some sections provide raw material for a separate book, co-written with others, *House of PTE - an Oral History of Pollard Thomas Edwards*.

The title *Mansions for the Many* reflects my conviction that everyone deserves a decent home regardless of their circumstances. The work shown here ranges from affordable houses for disadvantaged families to luxury penthouses for the wealthy. Courting confusion, I have previously used the same title for an essay specifically about mansion flats, also reproduced here. You just cannot keep a good title down.

Andrew Beharrell - London 2024

Thames View East

Contents

Life before PTE – becoming an architect

The closest I have come to fame was appearing as the cover pinup for Nursery World magazine in April 1962 as a two-year-old boy wearing a smock and playing with a clockwork motorcycle. After that I retreated into decent obscurity. My interest in motorcycles outlasted my juvenile modelling career: as a teenager I liked to arrange the latest issues of Classic Motorcycle alongside World of Interiors in a fanshape on my Habitat coffee table.

My first design book was 'Living with David Hicks', which featured lots of hessian walls, glass tables and labradors. From around age ten I confidently expected to become a designer of some sort, and parental expectations nudged me away from interior design and towards architecture.

Our house was designed in what Osbert Lancaster satirised as the 'Stockbroker Tudor' style, and nearly all the houses in Ascot and Sunningdale were either that or Neo-Georgian. However, my best friend at primary school lived in a flat-roofed, steel-framed and glass-walled homage to Philip Johnson's Glass House. I can draw the plan from memory: open-plan, split-level living area and kitchen, connecting to a double-car port; separate bedroom wing with children's cabin rooms opening off play area; indoor-outdoor hallway connecting the two sides of the house and the entrance court and rear garden. His mother was Danish, and they had a huge collection of imported Lego, which kept us busy for hours.

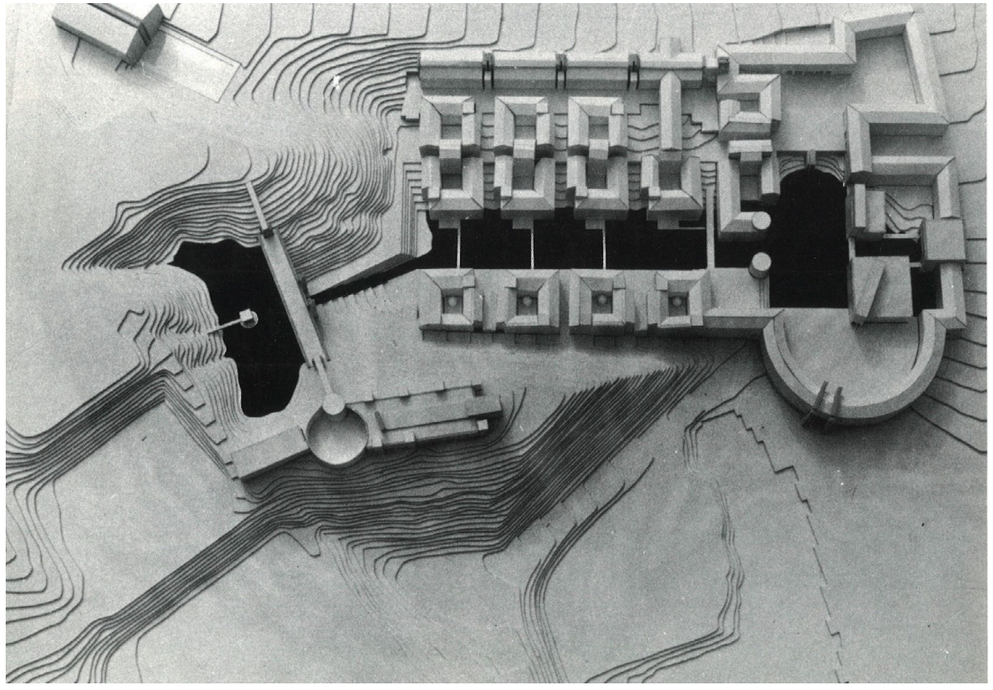
In case this suggests a die-hard little Modernist, I was equally enthralled by English country houses and churches. My three older brothers being away, my parents indulged my insatiable appetite for architectural tourism, and my gracious art history teacher Mrs Gordon took us on visits to Blenheim Palace, Osterley House and Syon Park. She encouraged her class of small boys to 'put it away and give me your minds' and 'always look up'.

When I left school, I spent a few months, and several subsequent summer vacations, with Italian architect Franco d'Ayala Valva and his family, helping to restore their weekend house Camporempoli in the Chianti hills or working in his studio near Piazza Navona in Rome. When I first arrived, Camporempoli lacked a clean water supply, and we took weekly communal baths in the nearest town, reached by Fiat 500 via a long pot-holed driveway through oak woods.

Franco was one of Frank Lloyd Wright's last pupils at Taliesin Wisconsin and Taliesin West in Arizona, and he wanted to create an architectural summer school in Tuscany based on Wright's model. The students (no more than six of us) worked on the house and garden, built experimental walls out of field stones (which collapsed) and did architectural competitions. One of these was to regenerate a northern textile town called Schio. We were exploring different design concepts when a French student leaped up and declared 'Il faut exalter le triangle!' So that is what we did: a celebration of aerial walkways, triangular in section on a triangular grid imposing order on a post-industrial landscape. Grand gestural architecture has never been my thing, and so I was rather embarrassed when we won the competition.

Franco understood that big gestures win competitions, but his philosophy of architecture was actually the opposite of grandiose, and was ahead of its time in its focus on climate. I still have a paper on *Organic Architecture and the use of Microenergies* in which he wrote: 'We believe living without energy waste to be a condition good in itself – and more comfortable'. In 1981 I found myself living in a caravan with my lifelong friend Mark Boyes-Watson in the grounds of Franco's shattered ancestral home in the Campanian earthquake zone south of Naples. We applied Franco's principles of organic and autonomous living to the design and construction of a prototype house to replace farmhouses destroyed in the nearby valley. Our clients had fled just in time from their collapsing stone house (beasts below and people above) and they prepared an Easter feast for us on the site of their emerging replacement, stylistically more Midwest then Mezzogiorno.

Franco also taught me that nothing is wasted. We lost a competition for a bank in Jeddah, which we would have clad with perforated clay blocks patterned with Saudi currency and derived from Wright's textile block houses. The same idea was reused on a tomb for a Calabrian shoe manufacturer. We did the client presentation in a safe house somewhere in a seaside resort, where he was in hiding, either from the law or the competition.



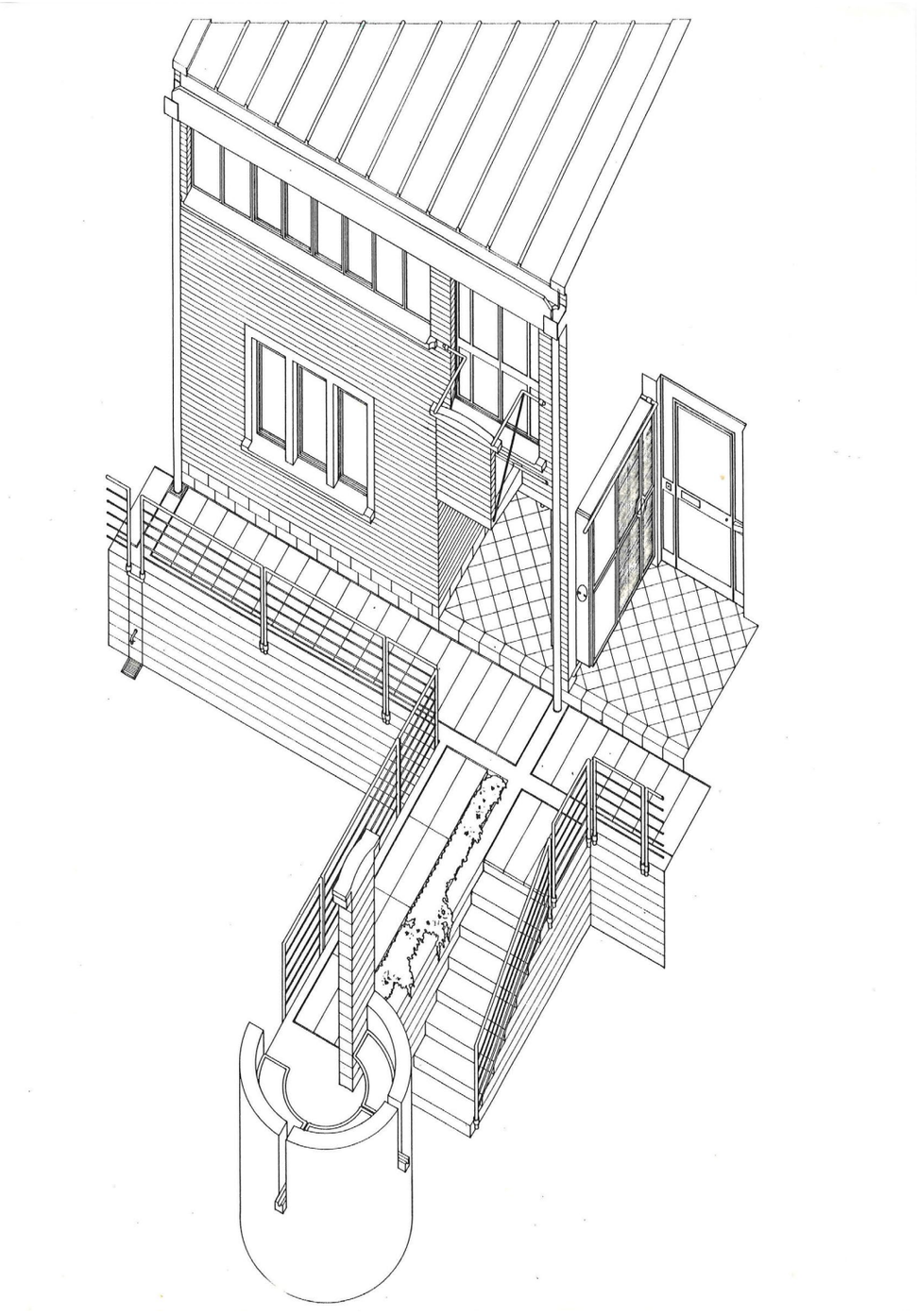
Final Diploma project for a new university in the mountains above Hong Kong (1984)

At Cambridge, where I made life-long friends in and outside architecture, I was fortunate to be taught by Colin St John Wilson, who was designing the British Library at the time, and a cohort of practicing architects (including Dean Hawkes, Nicholas Ray, Stephen Greenberg and Nicholas Hare) who admired Alvar Aalto and Louis Kahn. I learned to appreciate the kind of modern architecture which is deeply rooted in place and history. I wrote a thesis trying to explain how Louis Kahn's work was monumental and yet humane, and another on the Milanese practice BBPR, whose 26-storey Torre Velasca (1958) with the outward stepping profile of a Medieval fortified tower, outraged the Modernist establishment with its playful reference to history. (The 'R' in BBPR was Ernesto Rogers, uncle of Richard). In our humble housing work, it is this fusion of modernity and tradition, context and construction, that I enjoy in the work of PTE and its peer practices.

I took two years out between degree and diploma because I was enjoying work and travel. I first joined a tiny practice in Chelsea with a profitable business model. Kenneth Boyd was a sole practitioner who only employed Cambridge year-out students – I suppose because we were cheap labour (£3,000 a year), reasonably intelligent and (unreasonably) confident with clients. First among these was Russell and Bromley, for whose stores he developed their distinctive look of suede walls and chromium track lighting. These were delivered at high speed with minimal information by expert shop fitters.

I did a big trip around the USA with architect friends Fred London and Juliet Odgers, taking in the main East Coast cities and then driving from Chicago to Seattle, down the West Coast and into the Arizona desert. We visited many buildings by Frank Lloyd Wright and Louis Kahn, a highlight being the Salk Institute overlooking the ocean, where Fred persuaded the janitor to give us a guided tour of the celebrated service floors and the boiler room, which he boasted had enough power to light up San Diego. At Taliesin Wisconsin we met FLW's widow Olgivanna, and at Paolo Soleri's futuristic desert commune of Arcosanti we listened politely to wind chimes and earnest late-hippie philosophising.

Before returning to Cambridge for my post-graduate diploma, I worked for DEGW in Marylebone, another practice which had developed a niche specialism into a thriving practice – by transforming office fit- out into 'space planning' and management consultancy, based on understanding how spatial organisation relates to corporate structure and culture. I served time auditing the contents of the American Express offices in Brighton – office location, furniture and pot plant allocation were all strictly related to job status, with senior directors enjoying a corner office with a 'credenza' fully-stocked with booze, like Mad Men's Don Draper – and was then allocated to plan and detail a new house in Camden's Murray Mews for and with one of the partners. I already knew that I wanted to build a career around homes and housing.



Diploma project for new housing in Spitalfields – published in AJ 12 October 1983 with comment on the 'no-nonsense, hard-edged look'

1984-1994

Arriving at PTE

I arrived at PTE by accident. My friend Fred London (later a founding partner at JTP) had joined the practice, and John Edwards asked whether there were any more where he came from – no equal opportunities policy in those days. I had recently completed my diploma, was looking for work in London, and came for an interview with John at 55 Colebrooke Row, lugging my A1 portfolio full of hand-drawings on heavy tracing paper. The practice occupied and owned a double-fronted late Georgian house in Islington with five floors of small rooms and a large open plan extension. While waiting on a buttoned leather chesterfield, I was impressed by the gardener dragging his lawnmower up a ladder on to the grass roof of the garden studio. This was the House of PTE. It was fizzing with activity and energy.

My diploma project, set by Colin St John Wilson, was a new university in Hong Kong (image on page 9). I imagined that I was responding to that particular time and place, but I realise with hindsight that my proposal was a classic piece of mid-rise European town planning based around streets and urban waterways. I suppose I have been trying to build versions of it ever since.

PTE's New Concordia Wharf had just featured on the cover of The Architect's Journal. It seemed to me an impeccable piece of restoration and reinvention, and a symbol of London's early renaissance following a 40-year period of continuous decline in population and wealth. I recommend everyone to watch the film The Long Good Friday (1979), featuring Bob Hoskins as an East End gangster trying to reinvent himself as a docklands property developer, to get the feel of London on the cusp of major change.

I was interested in how and where people live, and had been lucky enough to get a couple of student projects published in the AJ: a housing scheme in Spitalfields (image on page 11) and a hotel in Bloomsbury, both complex infill sites embedded in London's historic fabric, and a suitable apprenticeship for PTE. Soon after starting work at PTE, I was even luckier that my final year project coincided with the RIBA's 150th anniversary and was inspected by the Queen on a visit to Portland Place. I was late, missed the etiquette briefing and managed to offend her by not using the correct form of address. When she asked me what I was doing now, I said 'designing homes for poor people in Hackney', to which she replied: 'you will probably be doing that for a very long time.' She was right.

The Vestry

When I started working on street house conversions and small infill projects at PTE I occupied a small room on the first floor of 55 Colebrooke Row.

The other occupants were Bryce Edge, who looked like Fred Astaire and owned a recording studio in Oxfordshire – he went on to manage Radiohead; Frances Anderton, who was enormous fun and who went on to a career in architectural journalism, soon moving to Los Angeles, where she now hosts a weekly design show on radio; John Alexander, who rode a Honda CB750 (iconic big bike of the period) which he kindly let me ride around the Regents Park Inner Circle after a softball game, rekindling my no-longer-secret passion for motorcycling – he founded his own practice in Winchester.

Some wag named our room the Vestry, after we painted it pale green and episcopal purple – I shudder at the memory. The parents of Frances collected unusual houses, and she kindly arranged for me to stay in an extraordinary art deco villa in the remote hills of the Ardeche. It was said to have been built for a Marseille car dealer in the 1920's and to be the earliest reinforced concrete house in the region. As a wedding present Frances presented me with her abstract drawing of the villa in the Vestry team colours.

I mention these lovely people partly to illustrate the many hundreds who have passed through PTE over the years and gone on to distinguished (or quietly productive) careers inside and beyond architecture. When I occasionally bump into PTE alumni they nearly always seem to retain an affection for the practice – even the very few who were asked to leave. A major part of the legacy is the people, not just the projects.

Inspecting the roof at Tower and York Houses - see page 20

The garden studio at 55 Colebrooke Row

Invisible Mending

North London Street House Conversions
Camden, Islington and Hackney *1984-1988*

Social landlords invest in 'invisible estates' before London gets its swagger back

When I joined PTE in 1984 the practice had lots of work refurbishing and converting London's street-houses for housing associations and local authorities, especially in West London and our home territory of Islington, Hackney and Camden. I was very fortunate to be put to work on these, under the kindly and experienced guidance of Harry Christophides, Noel Burge and others. It was a superb learning opportunity, projects moved fast from concept to completion, and I was running traditional construction contracts from the start – so, no problem finding suitable case studies for my Part 3 professional exams.

We did our own measured surveys, which sometimes involved wading through rubbish and pigeon guano, and on at least one occasion disturbing a rough sleeper. All drawings were by hand, of course, and the drainage records had to be drawn on linen for submission to the District Surveyor.

London's population had only just started to grow again, following nearly 40 years of post war decline. Margaret Thatcher was in power, and in 1986 the City of London experienced Big Bang deregulation. My brother co-founded a popular mail order company called Innovations – remote shopping before the internet. London started to get its swagger back, and there was plenty of opportunity for architects.

In the 1970's and early 80's London property had been cheap and much of it was damp and shabby. Social landlords had been able to buy houses in areas such as Notting Hill and Barnsbury, which are now very exclusive. Islington's Upper Street - today a playground of restaurants, bars, design stores and estate agencies – was full of old-fashioned shops, including tailors, corset makers and just one acceptable sandwich bar. I took a friend to view a house for sale in Canonbury, and he declared that he could not possibly bring his mother to such a run-down area.

41 Camden Park Road, a large end-of-terrace property, is typical of the many street houses transformed by this process. Working with a small network of experienced builders, we completely refurbished them inside and out, carefully keeping any surviving 'period features'. We added rear extensions and converted the attics. Many houses were in Conservation Areas, a relatively new concept, and some were Listed historic buildings, including late Georgian houses and some real gems like the Lloyd Baker Estate. Others were ordinary Victorian terraced houses.

Much later, in Altered Estates (2016), I wrote about 'invisible estates':

It is also worth remembering an alternative model of social housing which emerged in the 1970s, in reaction to the big post-war estates, and has been so successful that nobody notices it. This was the practice of local authorities or housing associations acquiring multiple street properties and improving them through a mix of refurbishment, conversion and infill development. For example, the Woodbridge Estate in Islington uses the word 'estate' in its traditional sense of a London neighbourhood substantially in one ownership, but seamlessly blending with adjoining areas. It is based entirely on a traditional street pattern with public realm, private gardens and no ambiguous shared space.

Lloyd Baker Estate

Tower and York Houses
Foley Street, Westminster *1985-1988*

Edwardian micro-flats are gently updated for modern lifestyles

My first major job as a newly qualified project architect in 1985 was to remodel a pair of mansion blocks in Candover Street and Riding House Street on the Howard de Walden estate.

Tower and York Houses were designed by Herbert Fuller-Clark in 1903 to house respectable clerks of modest means. The 37 flats were self-contained, but tiny, with a sitting room at the front, bedroom, and small kitchen / pantry at the back. Overall size was 38 sqm (compared with today's national minimum of 50 sqm): these were the micro-flats of their day, a century before Pocket Living. They had a WC but no bathroom: baths were taken in a tub in the kitchen. All the original ogival mouldings, doors and built-in cupboards survived. There was no lift to serve the two flats per floor over five storeys.

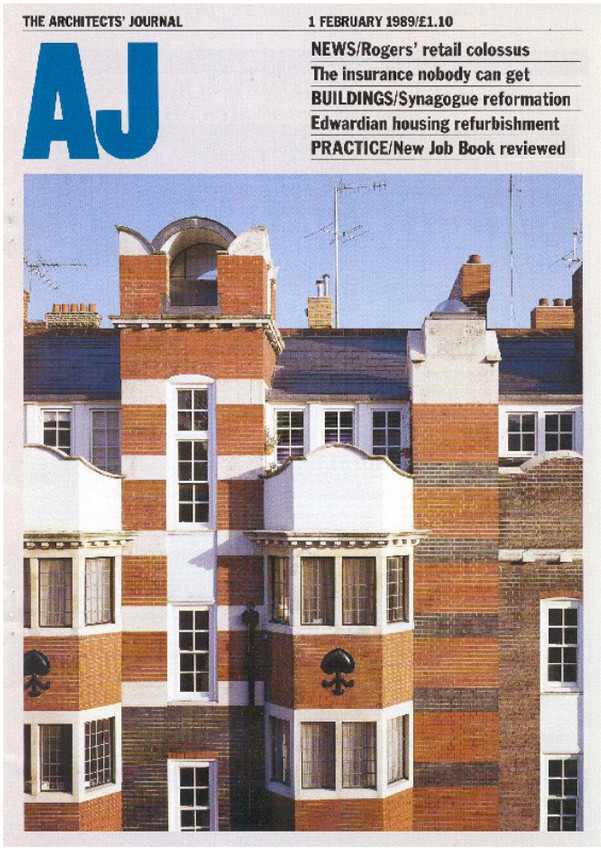
No expense was spared on the exterior, which features bay windows and stair towers with fine Queen Anne Revival proportions and red brickwork decorated with white rendered banding. The most striking feature is the green and gold mosaic advertisement for T J Boulting & Sons, Sanitary and Hot Water Engineers, which was also the developer. It is hard to imagine today a business having the sense of permanence to enshrine its marketing in mosaic or a planning authority agreeing to make an advertising hoarding the main feature of an apartment block.

Our task was to retain all the key features of these Grade 2 Listed buildings – or replace them with replicas where deterioration or fire regulations required – while updating for modern lifestyles. We took down the rear extensions, which backed into a deep lightwell, and replaced them with new bathrooms and bay-windowed kitchens. We also extended the stairwells to access new shared roof gardens.

The blocks were owned by Community Housing Association (later absorbed into the giant One Housing). This was my first experience of resident engagement, and I was surprised that the tenants were not the downtrodden poor, but middle-class professionals: I remember doing bespoke interior designs for a journalist. As well as serving disadvantaged people, housing associations at that time provided rented homes for those on moderate incomes who could not afford to buy in London (and certainly not in Westminster) – what was later called the 'missing middle'.

The procurement and contract administration were also very different from today. The contractor was a family firm with directly employed craftspeople, who knew how to build without being closely instructed. They tolerated being 'supervised' by an inexperienced young architect and helpfully corrected my more foolish instructions. The final account was agreed over a pub lunch, and the Housing Corporation accepted over-spend up to 15% of their already generous 100% grant funding.

The project appeared on the front cover of the Architects' Journal (1988 Number 5 Volume 189) with a feature by Robert Thorne. I also included it in my essay Mansions for the Many for The London Society (February 2021).



Tower and York Houses after restoration

SCPR offices

14 Wycliff Street, Islington *1991-1992*

Modern conservatory bridges the gap between Gothic and Classical

Nearly all my built work for PTE up to this point had been housing, and this project offered a great opportunity to do something different. Social and Community Planning Research (SCPR) did major national research projects, including analysis of election results and the annual survey of British sexual attitudes and behaviour. Their charismatic director Roger Jowell was a friend of John Edwards. The whole set-up was very 'Islington'.

SCPR had bought an 1874 Gothic former vicarage next to its Georgian headquarters on Northampton Square, and our job was to connect the two, while also restoring and fitting out the vicarage. Donald Bentley was the perfect project architect for this, and together with engineer Andrew Smith, we devised a cool modern link building, part-conservatory part-bridge. The project featured in The Architects Journal in November 1994.

Northcroft Court
Shepherd's Bush *1992-1997*

Beacon of the Future shines again

This dream project joins on to Becklow Road, which was built on the former playground (see page 34), and was for another housing association. I have a large-framed photo of it in my home office.

Northcroft Court is the conversion of a Grade II listed, Victorian school into 30 homes, plus the construction of nine new houses in the former playground. The design minimises structural alterations and retains the original classroom volumes.

Like many of the handsome schools – Conan-Doyle called them 'Beacons of the Future' - built between 1870 and 1904 by the London School Board, Northcroft was deemed unsuitable for modern education, and its lofty classrooms became homes. We converted the main school first and came back later to convert the annexe and build some more (gabled) houses in the grounds. I worked with Donald Bentley on phase one and Jane Howson on phase 2. It was very intricate work, fitting mezzanine galleries into the former classrooms and breaking up the long corridors into small groups of flats using the existing terrazzo stairs. Donald is tall, and we reckoned that if he could just stand upright below the galleries it would work for our residents. My favourite part is where we opened up the corridor on the single-storey wing to create a private alleyway lined with tiny houses – it reminds me of a De Hoogh painting of 17th century Delft.

Kenneth Powell, the Daily Telegraph architectural critic at the time, wrote of this scheme *'One of the few notable buildings, in a relatively featureless area, has been retained and given a new lease of life'.*

Private jobs

In my first five years at PTE I did lots of private jobs. The practice was very accepting of this, and believed it was all part of the learning process - Harry even gave me occasional advice on my private projects. My starting salary at PTE was £7,500 a year, and so the extra cash was very welcome. It stopped completely when I became a director and started working all hours.

I was living with my childhood friend Philip Daubeny in his flat at Marsham Court in Westminster – much later I wrote about this place for the London Society in Mansions for the Many. Philip then bought the top half of a house in Pimlico, and I did a lavish fit-out. The bathroom was in pink and grey marble stripes, modelled on Siena's Duomo, and the shower room featured a massive terrazzo tray (supplied by Diespeker - I cannot remember how we got it up there) and dark green marble walls. The kitchen was hand built in ash and ebony, and the living room curtains in acid yellow silk looked like papal vestments.

On other projects I collaborated with a friend and PTE alumnus Pascal Madoc-Jones, a very talented architect who went on to work with Rick Mather on fancy restaurants and then started his own practice. Philip asked us to design for him a sandwich bar in the new Chelsea Harbour development. All the fittings were bespoke in stainless steel, and the hand painted ceiling was a homage to Tiepolo, with putti gamboling in the clouds with our client's terrier Pablo.

I suppose these rather flamboyant projects (which included several other flats for private clients) exorcised my childhood interest in interior design. Everything I have done since has conformed to the architect's default setting of restrained good taste – sometimes you just need to have fun.

Lunch bar in Chelsea Harbour (1988)

Visible Mending

In January 1992 Alan Powers published an article about PTE in Country Life Magazine titled 'Visible Mending'. He wrote:

Little known except through the architectural press, the London firm of architects Pollard Thomas and Edwards has proved that post-Modernism need not be shallow, nor conservation the enemy of new building. Its schemes offer an appealing vision of London of the future.

Here are a few of my projects, which belong to that period in the practice's history.

Majestic Court
Manor House, Hackney *1986-1988*

Learning that money is the only building material

My first major new build projects at PTE were for two separate sites on the same street of large Victorian villas south of Finsbury Park, in an area of lodging houses and cheap hotels, which had been notorious for kerb-crawling.

The smaller one is Majestic Court, on the former car park of the Majestic Hotel. This was my introduction to PTE's own property ventures, the client being a development company PTE Services owned by the Directors – so, my design and performance were under the spotlight. It was a great education in how to design with a clear focus on the customer, the brief and the budget. Bill Thomas never let me forget that 'money is the only building material'. This was the start of my 25-year close working relationship with Bill – he didn't teach me everything I know about architectural practice, but most of it.

PTE had already completed several property developments for the open market, among the first architects to do so following changes to the RIBA Code of Conduct in 1979 – prior to that the RIBA seems to have viewed such activity as ungentlemanly. This was the start of a series of affordable housing developments which were pre-sold to a housing association. The business model limited the risk and cashflow, but it produced a lower return and required us to design within very stringent cost, specification and programme constraints: in this case the development had to be handed over 15 months after site purchase. The development profit was very marginal, but we used the project to promote our own turn-key development service to housing associations, and PTE repeated the process on several future developments. I still have the development appraisal: the flats cost £53,000 each.

There are 20 nearly identical one-bedroom flats for shared ownership in three blocks: two four-storey blocks on the street frame the entrance to a courtyard, with a two-storey block at the back. Eight flats have their own front doors to the outside, and the rest are entered from simple shared staircases, with no lifts. Long before the GLA's dictat we provided every home with a decent balcony and dual (actually triple) aspect living rooms. The site plan, building layouts and construction details were all honed to get the best quality we could from the budget and context, conveyed by just a few hand drawings - an early example of my later mantra of intelligent replication. I was rather proud of the galley kitchens – a simple straight run of beech veneer cabinets composed like a symmetrical façade, the narrow space having two openings to the living room, like the 'in' and 'out' doors in a restaurant.

We conceived the flats as modern interpretations of hipped roof semi-detached Victorian villas, made in brick and slate – a device which recurs in many PTE projects of this period.

Portland Rise

Manor House, Hackney *1986-1994*

A tale of dust heaps, nuns and mythical olive groves

I graduated from Majestic Court to a larger site down the street, where we designed 64 flats and houses for New Islington and Hackney Housing Association (NIHHA). Like the earlier scheme, triple-aspect flats are paired around a staircase in four-storey 'villas'. Around this repeated diagram we wove lots of variety around bow windows, corner windows, front steps (still permissible at that time) and entrances. I was involved from start to finish, with some interesting bumps along the way. This may be the first time I had a team to help me, and part way through I hired Tricia Patel, which led to a lifetime collaboration.

Our client was negotiating to buy the land from the Roman Catholic Diocese of Westminster. The site contained a row of dilapidated Victorian villas which had been joined up and converted into a hostel for international students. Another villa was occupied by Ursuline nuns from Malta, who ran a children's nursery and were led by the formidable Sister Eugenia. At the feasibility stage I attended meetings with the Diocesan Director of Finance at Westminster Cathedral, whose office contained an enormous Victorian cast iron safe, presumably containing the church's worldly wealth. At one meeting it was intimated (in deniable language) that the Diocese would like to include the Ursuline Sisters' house in the sale. When the sisters got wind of this they put up a fierce and effective resistance, and I am pleased to report that they stayed put.

I also had several meetings with the local priest whose 1960s parish church was also on the site. We had to wrap our development carefully around it, and our site strategy ended up with new villa apartment blocks on three street frontages and a mews of family houses winding through the centre of the site, with the church and the sisters embedded in the masterplan.

The land sale duly proceeded, and the old hostel was demolished using a wrecking ball and lots of overseas workers operating under conditions falling far short of today's health and safety standards. Gangs with pickaxes stood on mounds of rubble, like Dickensian dust heaps, reducing them to neat stacks of recyclable London stock bricks. These were too valuable for us to reuse, and their sale typically meant that demolition contracts were free or even delivered a surplus. This project, and pretty much every other one at this period, was built using Ockley Smeed Dean new London stocks – they still look great today. We also salvaged a pair of stone lions which guard the mews entrance.

After an elaborate courtship and tender process Higgins was selected as main contractor – the start of a long and productive relationship with this excellent family firm, which continues to this day. At an early meeting the young site manager Phil Burrows (who went on to become Construction Director at Higgins for many years) said he assumed I would like to go up the tower crane to take some photos. I have a fear of heights, but realised this was a test of virility which I could not decline. After the interminable climb to the top, I found that the only standing room was occupied by the crane operator's sandwich box, but the real shock was how much the entire structure leaned forward when taking up a load.

Construction was progressing well when a bizarre legal dispute brought it to a grinding halt. A tenant in a council block opposite asserted that he owned a large part of the site, that the Diocese had no right to sell it and he must be compensated, or the land returned to him. He claimed to have grazed goats and cultivated olive trees there in the 1960's, an idyll relocated from Cyprus to Hackney. He obtained legal aid, and the case went all the way to the High Court, where I had to stand as a witness, supported by a cast of priests and nuns who had known the site at that period. The case was clinched for us by a priest who testified that he had learned to drive a car in the exact same place and time, had no recollection of goats or olive trees on the car park and, given his primitive driving skills, there would surely have been livestock casualty figures as evidence – none were produced. I was struck by the kindness of the judge towards the plaintiff, regardless of whether he was a fantasist or a vexatious litigant. He was of course a 'man of straw', and the whole affair was very costly for our client.

This was the first of several legal disputes which have peppered my career, and I find them quite fascinating, especially dealing with the rigorous thought processes of barristers. However, I was never tempted to follow my father into the legal profession – even more stress than architecture, bigger material rewards, lots of intellectual stimulation, but none of the joy of creating a physical legacy.

Ellesmere Road
Chiswick *1988-1992*

Learning how to build homes on busy roads

In the late 1980s I started a series of projects in West London for various housing associations. Ellesmere Road backed on to some very desirable streets adjoining the grounds of Chiswick House but fronted the multi-lane A4. It was one of many happy collaborations with Peter Furley, with me running the project and doing the planning design while Peter provided the technical expertise to take it into construction.

We did two identical four-storey villas containing eight flats each, with ridge lines no higher than the neighbouring houses and paying respect to the local Arts and Crafts style: large canted bay windows front and back, top floor loggias and 'tweedy' brickwork (mixing a red and a multi in alternate courses) which became something of a trademark for us at that time (and seems to be back in fashion among today's proponents of the not-so-New London Vernacular.)

I despair at some of today's projects fronting heavy London roads – big blocks of single-aspect flats offering no respite from the noise, pollution and frenetic traffic – but I think this one does provide good living conditions. The arrangement of low-rise paired flats around a stair core (with no lift) means that every home has a quiet side, where we located the living room, kitchen and balcony. The bedrooms are on the noisy side, protected by winter gardens within the angled brick bays.

Becklow Road
Shepherd's Bush *1988-1992*

Learning that the client is always right, sometimes

In this period nearly all our projects had pitched (and usually slated) roofs, and we had to think about the shape and construction of the roof while working out the plan – it's so much easier (but less fun) with a flat roof. This project was all about gables, inspired by the local context and especially the historic London board school next door (see Northcroft Court).

We put three small apartment blocks, with 16 flats in each, close to the street and much closer to a row of mature plane trees than would be allowed today – they have all survived, and some of the balconies are happily entwined with the branches. Every home is a corner flat with a dual aspect living room, and the top floor has what estate agents call 'cathedral ceilings'. At the back of the site, we ran a terrace of 25 narrow townhouses, with gardens backing on to the neighbours' back yards. Flats and houses were set around a series of courtyards, where we had to fit lots of parking without making it feel like a car park – at that period planning policy demanded parking, even on this relatively well-connected urban site.

Although the completed homes were very popular, I was reprimanded by the client's housing management director for two crimes. Firstly, I had used white render on the façade of some of the houses, and his budget would not stretch to the regular repainting it required – I wish I had listened because some of our later bigger projects (and many by other architects) featured a lot of white render, and it looks awful very quickly if not looked after. Secondly (and unfairly I thought), the gabled bin stores were so palatial that rough sleepers had taken up residence in them – well, at least they were serving a housing need.

Beverley Road and Victorian Grove
Chiswick and Stoke Newington *1992-1995*

Learning how to get quality from Design and Build

Tricia Patel and I worked together on other quietly contextual projects of this era, which share similar features to Ellesmere Road: small infill developments for housing associations, with homes for social rent and shared ownership (27 houses and flats at Beverley Road in Chiswick and 22 at Victorian Grove in Stoke Newington); a contemporary take on the local brick vernacular; mix of family houses and low-rise walk-up flats; surface car parking in front or rear courtyards integrated with tree-planting and soft landscaping; boundary walls and railings combined with pergolas and handsome refuse and cycle stores (like little chapels). This gentle model of redevelopment was overturned when densities and heights started to rise in the late 90s.

These projects are also interesting from a procurement perspective. Typically, PTE led the planning and tender process, preparing a set of Stage E 'typical details' and then acted as Employer's Agent overseeing a Design and Build contractor, employing a separate or in-house architect to do the construction detailing. The resulting projects are well crafted, and my (gilded?) recollection is that the process was relatively harmonious.

Wren Site
Islington Green *1990*

An encounter with the Colonel

I only had a small role on this huge, but ultimately doomed, project to redevelop the whole urban block to the north of Islington Green. I include it here for the sake of two anecdotes.

Roger Pollard's ambitious plans included a cruciform galleria, with flats above shops, inspired by Milan's Galleria Vittorio Emanuele from the 1860s.

Part way through the project the client decided that the retail and residential markets were wobbly, and they would rather build offices, a sector where PTE had limited experience. We managed to keep the job, but we were required to take advice from the legendary Richard Seifert, who had changed the face of London with schemes including Centre Point (1963) and the NatWest Tower (1981), now regarded as modern classics expressing the spirit of their age.

The Colonel, as he was known, would have been around 80 years old when he arrived at our office in Colebrook Row in a chauffeur driven Mercedes limousine. It was an unorthodox site visit: I was invited to join him in the car, where the driver had carefully arranged a tartan travel blanket over his knees. We drove to the site, which was one minute's walk away, the electric windows were lowered just a crack and then (followed by a queue of impatient road users) the car crawled around the perimeter, which the Colonel studied intently before making some incisive and perceptive observations.

The other story prompted by this project is not so jolly. Roger had hired a new project architect (who shall remain nameless) to lead the job – he had commercial experience but also an explosive temper. It is the only time in 40 years I have heard anyone shout at colleagues at PTE – it's just not done (and yet I'm told it is commonplace at some other practices).

Retrofit First

Water Lane
Camden Town *1989-1990*

The contradiction between retrofit and housing targets

London's canals were still edgy places in the 1980s, but developers had discovered their charms and premium values. Terry Farrell's joyous studio for breakfast time TV, with its post-modern egg-cup finials, had been completed in 1983, and PTE did these nearby offices aimed at arts and media businesses.

I only helped out with the external works detailing on this project, under the direction of Peter Furley, who was a generous and very amusing mentor. I am including it here because it has the distinction of being the first PTE project (that I am aware of) to have been demolished. This prompted me in 2021 to draft the letter below to the architectural press, which wiser colleagues advised me not to send in case it was misread as professional sour grapes. Judge for yourself.

Memory Lane – a reflection on the AJ's RetroFirst campaign

For an architect, it is a sobering experience to have your creation demolished within your lifetime.

AHMM's Hawley Wharf is a worthy winner of the Housing Design Awards 2021. However, it is interesting to reflect that it required the demolition of a previous set of buildings designed by Pollard Thomas Edwards (PTE) and completed just 30 years ago.

Water Lane (pictured) was a group of workspace studios arranged like canalside merchants' houses. At just four storeys, it was a viable and profitable land use for the early 90's and its planning permission pushed the envelope of what was then acceptable. The commercial use (with no residential) reflected land use policies at the time.

Its replacement by AHMM's (excellent) mixed-use development illustrates how far the value, intensity and complexity of development in London has moved in three decades. It was clearly financially attractive to replace a relatively recent development, even though the new scheme is not especially dense by today's standards - indeed, in a less sensitive setting Water Lane would have been replaced by a tall tower.

The story also illustrates the fragility of the retrofit first pledge, which dozens of architects including Pollard Thomas Edwards and AHMM have signed up to. The AJ campaign urges us to consider the retention of existing structures as the default preferred solution over redevelopment. Simon Allford himself says 'Recycling buildings, materials and ideas is the history of architecture. Waste and consumerism is very much a 20th-century obsession. Now it is essential that, when making, we think reuse first, new build second.'

This is certainly not to single out AHMM for failing always to live up to the pledge - nor to mourn the passing of Water Lane. Although my practice Pollard Thomas Edwards has restored and 'repurposed' numerous buildings - especially schools, hospitals and robust commercial buildings – we have also been involved with extensive demolition of unpopular housing estates and shabby industrial sheds, and we will continue to promote demolition when it is, on balance, the best solution for a particular site.

The fact is we all struggle when our declarations of intent come up against the reality of what our clients, customers and political leaders require from us – and just now they require 'intensification' of land use, especially for housing. Adding layers of planning requirements, including whole life carbon assessments, does not make the problem go away, but adds to the complexity and contradiction built into the system.

If we are serious about retaining existing buildings, and the carbon they embody, then there will often be a significant reduction in the potential to intensify land use and to deliver the homes and other space which we say we desperately need. Meanwhile planning authorities remain fixated on trying to deliver housing numbers.

In a post-pandemic and post-Brexit London, it's time to talk about the 'growth agenda' and to acknowledge that this is at odds with key climate change measures. We cannot have it all ways.

Visible Wrecking

Experiencing the power of protest

PTE had always been reticent about seeking publicity, and arguably still is - one of my proudest moments was being told by a client at a major project interview 'you are the best practice I have never heard of' – but in 1992 we decided to capitalise on Alan Powers 'Visible Mending' article by holding an exhibition at Islington's Business Design Centre.

Unfortunately, this coincided with our releasing plans for a small block of new flats for a housing association in Albion Square, Hackney. Our designs carefully replicated the Victorian semi-detached houses of the surrounding conservation area, and so we were surprised when they unleashed a furious reaction from the neighbours, who formed an action group and plastered posters all over our offices and exhibition condemning 'Pollard Thomas Edwards – Visible Wrecking'. Thankfully there were no social media at the time.

While some objectors may have been worried about housing association tenants moving into their homeowners' paradise, the focus of the objection was our client's intention to build on 'meanwhile open space'. At that time there were many small gap sites in London, some of them created by the Luftwaffe, privately owned and awaiting eventual redevelopment. It made sense to use them for public benefit as temporary pocket parks, but when people have become used to enjoying a temporary benefit, they can be tenacious about holding on to it – we experienced later examples with temporary gardens, artists' studios and markets.

'Meanwhile' land uses can be such a great benefit to communities, but if protest groups, empowered by social media, misrepresent the back stories and demonise landowners for legitimate development plans, this will dissuade landowners from offering temporary uses in the first place.

Our offensive new villas at Albion Square

Design and Build

A good idea with some terrible outcomes

The 1988 Housing and Regeneration Act heralded a tightening up of the grant funding regime, in reaction to relative largesse under the previous regime, which I have described under the Tower and York project. Levels of subsidy were reduced, and cost or programme over-runs were not tolerated. The PTE Services business model (see Majestic Court above) was an attempt to get ahead of the game by offering a risk-free product.

Meanwhile Neil Kenworthy of quantity surveyors Monk Dunstone Associates (MDA) sold to housing associations the newly minted JCT 89 Design and Build Contract, and the lives of housing architects changed overnight. Neil's hobby was horse-racing, and he looked rather like a bookie – I could not help but admire the power of his argument, although I disagreed with the conclusion. I remember Nick Dudman, development director at NIHHA coming to our office and explaining in a kindly but solemn tone that in future design work beyond the planning stage would be controlled by the contractor. If architects wanted to detail their designs we would have to be employed by the contractor, and we would have no decision making or supervisory powers. Alternatively, we could retain a contract administration role by acting as the Employer's Agent (a new concept), but then the contractor would employ a different architect for the working drawings.

Portland Rise was a happy early example of Design and Build, when housing associations were seeking to combine the design and quality control of traditional contracts with the cost and risk advantage of D&B. In this case PTE did extensive tender drawings and then acted as employer's agent.

The consequences of this change have been seismic for the housing industry, and they have coloured my subsequent 35-year career in housing. Design and Build is a good idea in theory, but on many occasions it has in practice failed to deliver the quality which clients and residents expect – and sometimes it has gone very badly wrong. D&B and the associated industry culture was a major contributor to the Grenfell Tower disaster in 2017. By insisting on a fixed price for an inadequately defined recladding contract the commissioning body created the conditions for contractors to put price before quality, and, as it turns out, price before the safety of occupants. Secondly, the enquiry following the disastrous fire, exposed a complex project team structure of designers, technical specialists, suppliers, main contractor and subcontractors, with nobody having a comprehensive understanding and overview of the building's performance and each blaming the others. We hope and pray that Grenfell was an extraordinary event, but the processes it illustrates had become commonplace in the housing industry.

For a summary of the problems with D&B and some tentative solutions I suggest you read the Housing Forum's 2021 report Better Procurement for Better Homes, for which I wrote the chapter on Procuring Good Design. Here is an extract from my longer draft.

The procurement spectrum – getting what we pay for versus getting what we want

To create sustainable and popular homes and places we need a holistic understanding of quality, and we need to counter the tendency in our industry to focus only on the measurable outputs: cost, risk, defects etc. We need to value and protect the things which are harder to measure, but ultimately underpin our whole purpose as housing providers and place makers: health, wellbeing and happiness. So, which forms of procurement are better able to deliver holistic quality?

The procurement spectrum ranges from buying an off-the-shelf product to commissioning a bespoke building. In our view these two ends of the spectrum are best able to deliver quality – but nearly all our housing procurement lies somewhere in between. To shape a more effective way forward, it is worth understanding the inherent tensions and contradictions this has created.

When we choose to buy a modular house - usually after some comparison shopping – we know what we are getting, and we expect our purchase to match the quality standard in the sample. We expect a product to be certified and rigorously tested through prototyping - whether it's a pair of shoes or a building. With housing, this applies most obviously to off-site construction– but it could apply to standardised quality-controlled designs assembled on-site.

By contrast, if we want a unique building, then we expect our design team to detail and specify precisely what we want - sufficient for a contractor to price and deliver precisely what we expected. That is traditional procurement: it was normal in housing until 30 years ago and is still common in high-end domestic projects.

Traditional procurement – especially for housing associations and councils – proved to be expensive and prone to contractual disputes. When the government tightened up the funding regime in 1989, clients rapidly adopted design and build procurement to control cost and transfer their risk – and by and large it has done that.

Has it produced quality? Sometimes, yes, but we would suggest that is despite the procurement method not because of it. It has been down to committed and talented people – clients, contractors, suppliers and consultants – to produce good collaborative outcomes whatever the formal constraints of the contract.

Three decades have seen numerous efforts to invent D&B variants, which try to square the circle between time, cost, risk and quality. The PPC 2000 Partnering contract was far from perfect, but it got closest.

Transforming Suburbia

Pageant Avenue
Hendon, Barnet *1989-1993*

Bringing urban housing types to the outer suburbs

Pageant Avenue was my first project in the Outer London suburbs, and an early example of 'suburban densification'. With 180 houses and flats, it was also much the largest site I had tackled, and a forerunner of later masterplans, where we got to design whole streets and neighbourhoods. PTE's Grahame Park masterplan, the largest regeneration scheme in London in its day, is next door.

I have written about London's suburbs in later thought pieces including *Semi-Permissive*, *Privet Lives* and *Semi-Heaven*. Although the modest height, tree-lined avenue and central green at Pageant Avenue give it a suburban character, we essentially imported urban or inner suburban housing types - terraced cottages and four-storey 'villa' blocks of flats - to raise density far above the dispersed houses of former RAF officers which we replaced.

These villas developed the paired-flat types from Portland Rise into larger blocks with four one-bedroom flats per floor, again with no lift. The blocks are well-spaced so that every flat is a corner flat, and we again used corner windows to give some a triple aspect. To make the homes affordable to first time buyers under a shared ownership scheme, the site plan, building layouts and basic construction are all very cost-effective. We then added character and variety using striped brickwork, curved metal corner balconies and loggias, and glazed lanterns over the stairs.

The contractor was Willmott Dixon, and their contracts manager was a young Andy Hill. It was the start of a very long and productive relationship, with Hill eventually becoming PTE's largest client and a major player in UK housebuilding.

In 1989, when Pageant Avenue had just started on site, I was promoted to a Director of PTE, celebrated my thirtieth birthday, became a father and moved to the suburbs myself, from Battersea Park to Hampstead Garden Suburb. So it was a big year.

There was an interesting later phase on surplus land at the end of Pageant Avenue. In response to the 1991 recession the government provided funds for housing associations to buy up unwanted stock from private developers. Steve Rawlings at Notting Hill Housing Trust found a cunning way to use this fund to build some new houses and flats, but this required us to get planning permission and build them in record time – I think about 12 months from start to finish. It was my first experience of timber frame. The contractor was family firm Llewellyn, and their contracts manager Neal Hunt became a long-term future collaborator, ending up as development director at Poplar Harca.

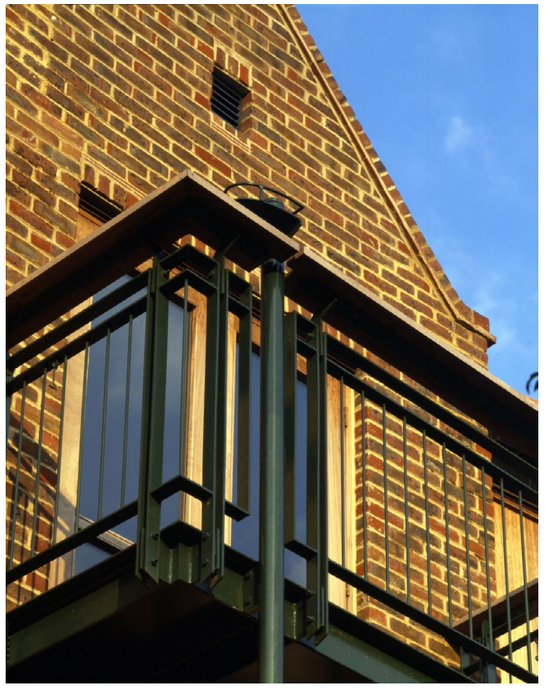
Birchen Grove
Wembley, Brent *1989-1994*

Homage to the Edwardian country house brings joy to elderly residents

This sheltered housing scheme is built in the form of a continuous crescent, giving all residents a view of the garden and a wooded churchyard and steeple beyond. There are 28 sheltered flats and a 32-bedroom registered care home.

The project was one of the first where I got to collaborate with a separate project architect, in this case the talented Adrian James, who went on to create his own successful practice in Oxford. We shared a love of Lutyens, and we evolved a design inspired by English country houses – I was delighted when the publicity photos featured a golden retriever lounging in the sunshine. Adrian did all the complex details required to set a curved building into a steep hillside and yet achieve level access throughout.

Although this felt like an idyllic rural site, in fact it is one of London's poorer boroughs, and a short distance from the dystopian North Circular highway. An old people's home overlooking a burial site may also sound unpromising, but we immediately saw the potential to create a tranquil and sociable place with a bucolic outlook. The client was Network Housing Association, and the residents were all social housing tenants. We must have stretched the budget to afford decorative brick detailing and Iroko joinery, but the elderly residents really appreciated it. The care-home manager told me that several had been terrified of moving but had burst into tears of joy when they saw their new place.



Vicarage Farm Road
Hounslow *1991-1994*

Homage to the garden suburb attracts unexpected praise

This suburban estate, near the Great West Road and under the Heathrow flight path, was quite unusual for PTE at a time when our work was still mainly focused on urban London, and it is a forerunner of much larger recent projects for regional urban extensions and new settlements.

I had recently moved to Hampstead Garden Suburb and designed for this project a new set of house types paying (rather value engineered) homage to the Arts and Crafts movement and to garden city planning principles. Instead of the usual West London winding cul-de-sacs of semi-detached houses, I designed a continuous avenue wrapping around a central green. For economy and density, the 63 houses are in short terraces of three (like my own HGS cottage) rather than semis. The four corner blocks of flats look like larger houses, and every flat had its own front door to the street.

We struggled with the Design and Build contractor, and I was not entirely happy with the outcome, but I received an unexpected endorsement from Neil Kinnock, leader of the Labour Party, no less. At the opening ceremony he gave a very kind speech, saying that usually he had little time for architects, but that these homes were exceptionally well- designed, and the tenants should be very proud to live there.

Semi-Heaven

In 1989 I moved from a mansion flat overlooking Battersea Park to an Arts and Crafts cottage in Hampstead Garden Suburb and later to a 1930s semi-detached house nearby. It was the start of a love affair with suburbia. I wrote about this for the London Society 31 May 2022.

In 1993 I moved with my young family to a semi-detached house in Hampstead Garden Suburb. We stayed for 16 years and moved only because of an opportunity to build our own place nearby. Like many of our neighbours, we were only the third generation of owners of our 1935 house: we know couples who moved in when they first had children and plan stay until they are carried out. The houses are large enough, but not too large, and they are endlessly adaptable. One family we know has remodelled three times: to accommodate three young children, two careers and a nanny; to provide semi-privacy for teenagers; and now to suit semi-retirement for music-loving bibliophile empty-nesters.

When we moved in, our house was impeccably clean and relentlessly beige. Little had changed since the 1930s, and we gently lifted it into the modern age, keeping the sensible room layout, lovingly restoring the draughty Crittall windows and the cream and black bathroom tiles, stocking the teak veneered wardrobes, with their original trouser press, cufflink drawer and tie rack. Far away in Northumberland on a freezing New Year's Eve, soon after completing our restoration, we received a call from our neighbours to say that our house had suffered a catastrophic plumbing leak. The fire brigade had to break in to shut off the water, which had been cascading under pressure from a broken pipe in the roof and had seeped through the party wall. Teapots inside kitchen cupboards were full to the brim, such was the downpour. The point of this story is that the construction was so robust that the house dried out with relatively little damage, helped by the suspended ground floor and raised threshold, not permitted today: the water just poured through and out into the street.

Hampstead Garden Suburb is a rather privileged place, rigorously conserved in its original state by a Trust, which does not hesitate to serve enforcement notices on illicit installers of plastic windows, or to name and shame householders who otherwise offend. One of its greatest achievements, in sad contrast to most London suburbs, is the preservation of front gardens from being concreted over for parking.

Devon Rise inspired me to write a homage to the suburban front garden called Privet Lives, celebrating the many positive impacts of the humble hedge: on the environment and ecology; on air quality and privacy; on jobs for gardeners and exercise for householders. Above all, front gardens and front gardening provide opportunities for casual social interaction – and during the pandemic they came into their own for socially distanced doorstep encounters. Book- clubbing, hedge-trimming, car-washing and produce-swapping – these cliches of the suburban good life are precious everyday activities which create a context for a sociable society.

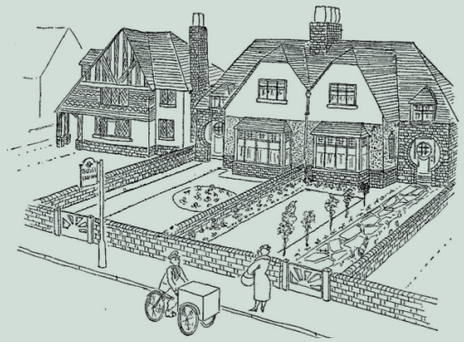
Reflecting on this period in my life made me wonder why this excellent housing type has been so overlooked by architects and planners, and to reflect on the future of London's suburbs under threat from active densification and casual neglect.

Rookfield Estate, Muswell Hill drawn by Hoi Yat Tsoi

Origins and Perception

London's biggest building boom took place in the 1920s and '30s with massive expansion of the suburbs around new commuter rail and underground links. The great architectural legacy of Metroland is the semi-detached house. There are around 541,000 semis in the Outer London Boroughs. The inter-war semi is probably the most under-appreciated of London's major housing typologies. Although often derided by the professions and the press, it is enduringly popular among residents of London's suburbs, and accounts for over 10% of our housing stock. The semi is endlessly adaptable to changing demands and circumstances.

The suburban semi-detached house was pioneered by distinguished architects and planners of the Arts and Crafts and Garden City movements, and it was popularised by the developers of what Osbert Lancaster famously dubbed 'Bypass Variegated'. They all extoll the merits of a house with its own front door, and gardens front and rear. Pairing offers the appearance and status of a 'villa' and the practical benefits of a garden-passage and side-windows – at a lower development cost and higher site density than a detached house.



'Metroland' is now used, with growing affection displacing scorn, to describe the inter-war outer London suburbs. It was originally coined (as Metro-Land) by the marketing people for the Metropolitan Railway as it pushed out into North-West London and beyond.

The semi-detached house is by no means the only typology found in the suburbs, but it is the predominant one, and, for most of us, it captures the character and image of Metroland, in both innocent times, and times of neglect and degradation. Nor is the inter-war semi the first application of this typology - its origins lie in Victorian paired villas, model cottages for agricultural workers and the artful pairings of Richard Norman Shaw at Bedford Park and Parker and Unwin at Letchworth, and their many collaborators – but the builders of London's inter-war suburbs rolled it out as popular housing for aspiring people on modest incomes.

While the suburbs provided an accessible arcadia for their residents, they became a lightning conductor for the snobbery of higher-minded people – some of whom came from the places they so despised. In The Intellectuals and the Masses, John Carey devotes a whole chapter to 'The Suburbs and the Clerks'. Many pre- and post-war writers describe the soul-destroying conformity and ugliness of the suburbs. Here is George Orwell in Keep the Aspidistra Flying (1936) on 'the futility, the bloodiness, the deathliness of modern life' and in Coming Up for Air (1939) on 'semi-detached torture chambers where the poor little five-to-ten pound a-weekers quake and shiver'. Osbert Lancaster wrote: 'It is sad to reflect that so much ingenuity should have been wasted on streets and estates which will inevitably become the slums of the future. That is, if a fearful and more sudden fate does not obliterate them prematurely: an eventuality that does much to reconcile one to the prospect of aerial bombardment.'

Disappearing from view

The semi and the suburbs did not get much of a look-in during my architectural education in the early 1980s, which elevated the inner city as an aspiring architect's proper habitat. The closest we came was a coach tour of Milton Keynes, in which the greatest respect was reserved, not for its many suburban culs-de-sac, but for the heroic reinvention of the classical terrace at Netherfield (1972), with its emphasis on total control and uniformity. This grand vision has alas been subverted by residents' unstoppable urge to customise their homes.

I think that architects started to take a more positive view of London's outer boroughs when, priced out of Camden and Islington, we began the great migration to Enfield and Waltham Forest. Today there is some excellent new housing which shows a real understanding and affection for the suburbs.

Gateway to heaven

The side-passage and the party fence are the defining characteristics of the semi-detached house. The relationship between 'adjoining' owners, whose two conjoined dwellings form a pair, is subtly different from the relationship between 'adjacent' owners, separated by that mystical space the side-passage. The competitive jousting of adjoining owners was satirised in the Bonzo Dog Band's 1968 song My Pink Half of the Drainpipe (I think I'll paint it blue): they may be best of friends or lifetime enemies, but they have to cooperate to preserve the integrity of the 'unit'.

Adjacent owners are physically separate, but the side passage is an intimate shared space, with endless opportunity for social connection or conflict.

There are three basic arrangements, which are repeated all over London: paired narrow side passages separated by a fence or hedge - although sometimes removed by agreement or neglect; wider shared passage, leading to a pair of garages at the rear – sized for an Austin Seven rather than a modern SUV; wide private side passage, accommodating a car space or garage. These variations, coupled with the original affluence of the neighbourhood, generate several variations in plot width from a minimum of around 7.0m to a generous 12m.

The side passage served several important practical purposes: access to the garden for the import of manure and the extraction of produce, which reaches its zenith in the Dig for Victory campaign during World War Two; access to the kitchen side-door in a period when trades people were not welcome at the front door and middle-class households might have a daily help or even a live-in maid; access for coal supplies and extraction of ash, together with household refuse, which was a tiny fraction of what we chuck out today. The semi-detached arrangement also enabled side-windows, especially to stair landings and WCs, and location of boiler flues and pipework away from the main façade.

Beyond these practical considerations, the side passage is a gateway to the private heaven of the back garden and the secret world of shed-land. In low value areas this has taken on undesirable associations with illegal sub-standard housing for disadvantaged people, including low-wage migrant workers: 'beds-in-sheds'. Elsewhere, Londoners have a more romantic view of the garden shed as a haven for hobbies, a mini-warehouse for storing stuff and a micro-business HQ. In the iconic 1970s TV sitcom The Good Life Tom and Barbara Good create a completely self-sufficient small-holding in their Surbiton back garden (actually filmed in a pair of real semis in Northwood). The side passage sees a traffic of livestock and produce, and the Goods even generate power from manure. With their longing for a simpler healthier life, they are the apostles for today's anti-globalisation and Slow Food movements.

When PTE designed a street of new family houses in Cricklewood in 2011 (see Gladstone Village) we started with a homage to the semi, but then persuaded ourselves that the space occupied by the side passage was better used to expand the ground floor accommodation. We reasoned that today people want small low-maintenance gardens more suited to barbecuing pigs than raising them. I now wonder whether our obituary to the side passage was premature, especially given the importance gardens took on during the pandemic – for those lucky enough to have one. How many flat-packed home-offices have been threaded into suburban back gardens to support the new normal of working from home?

Self-help for the Suburbs
This is an opportune moment to reconsider the future of those expansive low-rise suburbs which lie between the 'growth areas' and 'opportunity zones', and to reappraise their distinctive contribution to domestic life and the everyday architecture of the semi-detached house.

Policy Exchange's 2022 report Strong Suburbs *considers the prospects for gradual growth and change, based on homeowners getting together to vote for increasing density on their streets and making some money in the process.*

Similar ideas were trailed in a 2015 joint submission to the NLA from HTA Design and Pollard Thomas Edwards: Transforming the Suburbs: Supurbia and Semi-Permissive.

This report shows how incremental and small-scale urban intensification of suburban London can increase housing choice and supply, promote economic activity, improve local service provision and reduce car dependence – whilst improving quality of life, including green open space. Doubling the density of just 10% of the outer London Boroughs could create one million new homes.

Pollard Thomas Edwards has recently carried out a detailed study for a south London borough applying the spatial ideas behind semi-permissive to incremental intensification and upgrading of their own stock of inter-war suburban housing.

Suburbs under Pressure
Meanwhile the suburbs are increasingly under pressure to accommodate dense new housing developments. As inner London runs out of development land and politicians of all flavours lack the courage for serious review of the Green Belt (at the time of writing), the obligation to deliver new housing in volume falls on the outer boroughs, which cover nearly 80% of London's land area. It falls especially on those suburban town centres, which enjoy the benefit – or suffer the curse – of good public transport connections. If you visit North Acton today you will see a vision of high-rise Gotham City erupting from a sea of semis, in response to the opening of Crossrail.

Suburban evolution
Let's slow down the superdense redevelopment of suburban town centres while we assess the long-term impacts and figure out how to do it better. Let's help London's outer suburbs find their proper place in the 21st Century by appreciating their underlying qualities and encouraging incremental transformation, rather than the current choice between neglect or drastic change. Let's apply innovative thinking (like Strong Suburbs and Supurbia) and new technologies (like e-bikes, Passivhaus and its retrofit equivalent Enerphit) to make them more sustainable.

Semi-Permissive

Relevant to these early suburban projects, but published much later (2015), I wrote a piece called *Semi-Permissive* and joined up with Ben Derbyshire and colleagues at HTA in a joint submission to a New London Architecture (NLA) Ideas for London competition. HTA's part was wonderfully captioned *Supurbia*, and we called our combined work *Transforming Suburbia*. Here is a summary of the semi-permissive idea in the form of a letter to the Mayor.

Dear Sadiq Khan,

Transforming London's suburbs through 'semi-permissive' development
I am writing to promote an initiative to transform London's suburbs through small-scale incremental and collaborative development. With the support of the GLA, this initiative can significantly increase both the quantity and quality of housing in Outer London, and provide wider environmental and regenerative benefits. It is a natural fit with your vision for Good Growth, and a counter-balance to over-reliance on excessive town centre densification.

The challenge
The great architectural legacy of London's biggest building boom of the 1920's and 30's is the semi-detached house: around 541,000 in the outer London Boroughs.

For all its virtues, the inter-war suburban semi is land-hungry and energy-hungry and encourages car dependence.

Many suburban homes are under-occupied: if empty-nesters could realise value from their asset, move into a more convenient home and free-up a family dwelling then everyone wins. Conversely, there are issues with privately rented semis in multiple occupation.

Politicians and planners are reluctant to promote change in the suburbs, and suburban voters are fiercely protective of the status quo.

So, how can we modernise the suburbs? How can we update the building stock to modern standards, increase homes, reduce car dependence – and yet retain the space and greenery, privacy and independence that people value?

The solution
Our proposal is to use permitted development rights to incentivise homeowners to collaborate to replace or supplement their two houses with additional modern homes – development will be semi-permitted. It would lift the blanket restriction on 'garden grabbing' and intelligently extend permitted development.

We have modelled six scenarios based on a pair of typical suburban house plots, to create between one and five additional homes.

We propose a Prior Approval process under the Town and Country Planning General Permitted Development Order 1995, to apply in the following circumstances:

- *There must be a net increase in residential dwellings.*
- *Developments must be within 800m of a tube or railway station.*
- *Land in the Green Belt, Conservation Areas, statutorily and locally listed buildings are excluded.*

The benefits
Semi-Permissive development could significantly contribute to housing delivery in London, and implemented quickly and easily within the established planning system.

If just 10 % of qualifying owners brought forward proposals to double the homes on their plot, this would create 72,500 additional homes and renew a similar number.

A 15 % take-up coupled with our more ambitious design scenarios could create over 200,000 additional homes.

New and remodelled homes would comply with modern technical, access and space standards, including energy standards.

The location and transport criteria will help to reduce car dependence and parking blight.

The scheme will generate work for small builders.

Our proposals will provide a strong financial incentive for collaborating owners to help solve London's housing crisis.

The GLA is asked to endorse the scheme and fund research and development of a pilot scheme in a designated area.

The GLA and some Outer London boroughs were very interested in doing a pilot project, but could never quite find the time or the money – until one Outer London borough approached us to look at transforming the council's huge stock of interwar semis – but that is a later story.

1994-2000

Succession - Generational Shift

PTE's founding partners – John Edwards, Bill Thomas and Roger Pollard – had a vision of an architectural practice which would grow and thrive during their tenure and beyond. They recognised the incentivising power of giving people a say in the business and a share in its fortunes. I am a beneficiary of their vision and generosity, and I am hugely grateful. Their attitude influenced how we – the second generation – viewed our obligation to create a 'succession practice'.

In 1986 the partnership was converted into a limited company, and several of the associates – then in their forties and fifties - became directors. More radically, young recent joiners – Steve Fisher, Teresa Borsuk and me – were rapidly promoted. I was 29 when I became a Director in 1989.

One of the consequences of this policy was that PTE's board of directors swelled to thirteen people, which could be quite hard to control – especially when evening board meetings were accompanied by good food and drink. When the 1990 recession hit, PTE downsized from around 80 people to around 45, and the structure became quite top heavy. We all squeezed into our ancillary offices at Suncourt House on Essex Road.

In the meantime, John, Bill and Roger were each contemplating different futures for themselves. With impeccable timing they had sold 55 Colebrooke Row just before the recession, which enabled John to retire and Roger, in due course, to start a new career in leisure development. With extraordinary generosity, John gifted his shares to his successors, most of them to Steve, Teresa and me.

Bill took a sabbatical in Italy and returned in 1994 with a mission to reinvent PTE. The result was that control became focused on the younger generation, and the middle generation understandably felt sidelined. To their credit they chose to leave and set up their own businesses: Mike Lynch went solo, while Brian Johnson, Harry Christophides, Peter Mason and Judith Tranter formed JCMT. It was a painful period, but in the end, there was an amicable division of clients, projects, and people. JCMT built up a successful housing practice until the retirement of the older founders and the fallout from the 2009 recession.

Under Bill's continuing leadership, but with considerable autonomy given to the younger generation – now joined by Judith Marshall and Steve Chance as directors – PTE thrived, and marked the start of a new phase by moving to Diespeker Wharf – a story covered by Bill in PTE's *Oral History*.

In 2000 Bill retired from the practice and ownership passed to me, Teresa Borsuk and Steve Fisher, with Steve Chance and Judith Marshall having smaller shareholdings. Bill remained actively involved with PTE developments – notably Crystal Wharf, which I will cover in a later section – and as the majority owner of Diespeker Wharf and therefore PTE's landlord. (Bill had generously enabled us to acquire minority shares in the property, which much later we sold back to him in order to simplify ownership).

Bill's handover present to me was a business primer called 'Only the Paranoid Survive' and Peter Thorold's history of 'The London Rich'.

Pollard Thomas Edwards at The Reform Club (1991)

London’s Growing Up

Porteus Road
Westminster *1992 -1996*

Learning when to say no

The Architects’ Journal, November 1996:

‘Pollard Thomas Edwards (PTE) has designed a scheme in west London which goes against received wisdom about the desirable form for social housing but deals intelligently with a far from ideal site. PTE went for a bold solution of putting six mews houses along the most sheltered side of the site, and the rest of the accommodation - a total of 26 units - into a nine-storey triangular concrete framed block in the opposite corner. One wall of this faces the flyover, and has been given a deliberately defensive treatment, in contrast to the other two faces.’

Bill Thomas was sceptical about this project, and I wish I had listened. It did not turn out well, and the stylish published photos do not tell the whole story.

We were asked by Network Housing Association to put affordable homes on an awkward triangle of land hard up against the elevated A40 Westway and the Harrow Road roundabout below. I need to be reminded of this when I now get on my high horse about architects, planners and developers putting homes where they simply should not be. Worse still, the completed building was sold to another association providing homes for refugees – so, a group of very vulnerable people get to live next to an urban motorway (although it is also a stone’s throw from the super-rich homes of Little Venice – such is London’s diversity).

Our clever plan gave each home in the nine-storey triangular block (tall for the period) a corner living room with a sculptural in-situ concrete balcony. We clothed the building in bold stripey brick work. With no apparent attention to maintenance, the building today is filthy from highway pollution and festooned with wiring and satellite dishes.

It was also one of the first projects we did entirely in CAD, and not surprisingly this led to delays, mistakes and arguments with the very belligerent contractor. Know when to say no.

Writing this in 2024 I worry about the recent scramble to build housing on any scrap of land however unsuitable in pursuit of housing targets– including single aspect homes pressed up against major highways like the A406 North Circular.

Coda. To add to his woes the long-suffering project architect had the distinction of poisoning the office after serving oysters at Thursday lunch. The good news was that bad oysters take 24 hours to take effect, so many of us had terrible weekends, but were back at work on Monday with little impact on corporate productivity.

Carlton Gate and Eaton Plaza
Westminster *1996-2001*

Learning to do denser higher value development, and the limits of social integration

The client's brief for Carlton Gate insisted that the underground car park must accommodate a 'Range Rover with a ten-point stag on top'. (I had to look that one up – it means you don't want your big antlers snaring the overhead ducting…). The project involved higher sales values and taller buildings than I had generally tackled. The client, based in St John's Wood, was charming, patrician and occasionally humiliating: on one occasion he invited his receptionist to comment (negatively as it happened) on our elevational sketches.

The project features a 'necklace' of linked pavilions connecting with neighbouring blocks of flats and forming a new garden square open to the Regent's Canal to the south. Containing 234 flats (90 for sale, 69 for shared ownership and 75 for social rent) the scheme was a step up for me in size and scale.

Carlton Gate marked a shift towards smarter developments for private sale, including a greater focus on interior design and lighting, with a decent budget for the foyer, kitchens and bathrooms. It also marked a London-wide move towards higher densities and taller buildings up to a dizzying eight storeys – that seems so modest now, but it was a significant increase at the time. This reflected the recommendations of Richard Roger's Urban Task Force, a more permissive planning regime and an upbeat property market emerging from the early 90s recession.

The construction procurement of Carlton Gate was also unusual for us. The client operated through a determined project manager, who screwed maximum quality and minimum price out of everyone. The construction was let to a Leeds-based contractor, whose workforce commuted south for the week. The detailing was complex, and we ended up in dispute with the contractor - hanging brickwork from a steel support system fixed back to a concrete frame subsequently became second nature to PTE, but it was relatively new technical territory then. The outcome was a success and the flats sold well – several to high-class courtesans, it was rumored.

Carlton Gate's twin project is Eaton Plaza, which provides the required affordable housing developed by Network Housing Association. We conceived the two as one place, centred on a new London Square, and we preached the virtues of social integration and balanced communities. The clients were having none of that: they insisted on complete physical separation, for ease of independent management – and for fear that the affordable housing would contaminate the value of the private flats. Consequently, we designed a high wall, disguised by a pergola, bisecting the square and the car park below to keep rich and poor apart. After completion I was horrified by the different standards of maintenance between the two halves: the private development was impeccable, while the affordable had rubbish spewing out of the overloaded bin stores. So much for our idealism.

This was the start of a fruitful 12-year collaboration with future PTE director Dominic May, who joined us in 1997 and left to start his own practice in 2010.

Technology

When I started work at PTE all drawings were done by hand using ink on tracing paper – apart from the drainage records submitted to the District Surveyor, which had to be on linen. Much time was spent unclogging pens and scratching out errors or changes using a razor blade. Drawings were bound using coloured tape to protect the edges from tearing, and prints were collected and returned several times a day by a cheery nearby printer. I can still smell the intoxicating odour of fresh dyeline prints. We never tired of the cliched joke 'Someday my prints will come'. Creating a drawing was time-consuming and changing it even more so. We thought hard about every line we drew, and how to convey the required information with the smallest number of drawings.

The same discipline applied to written communications, which were typed in triplicate on a 'golf-ball' self-correcting typewriter, amended by hand and retyped. Some went through several drafts. All were sent by post – or courier if important and urgent. The reception area was often full of heavily clad and booted motorcyclists. Typically, it took several days to get a reply.

In 1989 Roger Pollard erupted into a directors' meeting fizzing with excitement. 'I have just seen this amazing thing called a fax machine. We must get one'. The first computer, the first CAD software and the first CAD manager followed soon after – also encouraged by Roger, who liked new technology. Within a decade all our projects were drawn using CAD, and from around 2012 we began the conversion to Revit, with everything modelled in three dimensions and drawn down to the last screw. The technology enables huge amounts of information to be produced, and so we produce huge amounts of information. Norman Shaw described Cragside (1869-1882), his highly complex state-of-the art country house for the engineer William Armstrong, in magnificent perspective drawings and a handful of key details.

Teresa, Steve and I are the last generation at PTE never to learn to draw on a computer. We enjoyed the awesome power, and the frustrations, of the digital age through the skills of others – and in the hands of a skilful and knowledgeable designer digital tools are, of course, truly liberating and enable better and faster design. I am not a Luddite, but I do like to recall a student lecture by Dr Bill Mitchell, an early adopter, who soon afterwards quit Cambridge for Los Angeles. He had digitised all Palladio's villa plans and proudly announced that he had generated one hundred additional versions 'which Palladio had not thought off'. Someone muttered 'there might have been a reason for that'. So, people might be surprised that I am optimistic about the impact of AI on architecture.

Competing

PTE's early projects started with a phone call, usually requesting a feasibility study. If the project went ahead, we got the job. If it didn't, we carried the cost and the client owed us the next one. If we performed well, this arrangement lasted indefinitely. Fees were loosely based on the RIBA fee scale – typically 2% for planning and 2% for working drawings. The larger projects might involve a competitive interview and even a competitive design proposal – even then, the selection was made on quality, and fees were generally negotiated.

That first phone call was not random chance. The partners had built up effective working relationships with key individuals at housing associations and local authorities. There was trust. It was a highly efficient arrangement, with minimal outlay on procurement processes and all resources focused on the project and the long-term relationship. 80% of our work was repeat business for existing clients.

This level of informality would horrify today's 'procurement officers', but I never came across anything that could be called unfair practice, let alone corruption. Of course it was difficult, but not impossible, for new practices to break into the relatively small circle of established 'housing architects', but is the system any easier or fairer today? PTE had started small and graduated to larger projects through innovative thinking and attention to what our clients wanted – supercharged by our own development projects.

We won the masterplan and first phase of Lefevre Walk based on our track record, references and an interview, which included tenants. When it came to the second phase, the project managers had taken control. We were required to recompete by answering formal questions couched in a new and mysterious language. We were so baffled by 'change control', 'programme management' and 'contingency planning' that we hired a specialist consultant to help write our answers. There was little or nothing about design. We scraped through.

Formal multi-stage competitive processes became the norm for all public sector and housing association projects, later spreading also into the private sector. For all their vaunted transparency and objectivity, these processes frequently appear opaque and unfair – especially the relationship between quality and cost. There is widespread cynicism in the profession today that fees will nearly always be the deciding factor.

PTE had no full-time communications or bid manager until 2006. In 2020 we had a department of eight full time people focused on bids for new work. Bids for larger projects typically cost around £10,000 and could rise to £100,000 for major design competitions. A significant number of procurement processes were aborted or never completed, because the clients changed their minds. Unsuccessful or undetermined bids accounted for around £400,000 a year or 4% of the practice's turnover.

The cost of competing disadvantages smaller practices and massively diverts the resources of larger ones, and in times of recession can threaten a practice's very existence. Imagine if that same resource was put to proper use or the wasteful overhead eliminated and the saving passed on to the real projects which ultimately have to fund it.

Altered Estates

In 2016 I edited and co-wrote a report called *Altered Estates – how to reconcile competing interests in estate regeneration* and in 2022 a follow-up *Altered Estates 2*.

These were collaborations with colleagues at our competitor practices HTA, PRP and Levitt Bernstein, and the reports encapsulate our collective thinking about key issues and best practice in estate regeneration, which has become an increasingly controversial field. The first report was especially influential, in part because, soon after publication, my co-author and friend Andy von Bradsky moved to the Housing Ministry. Here are some observations from my direct involvement with estate regeneration projects – for more extensive analysis and reflection please read the reports. Although I have grouped these projects into the 1994-2000 period, their timescales are very long (typically a decade) and extend well into the 2000s.

At Lefevre Walk new low-rise homes achieved a density of 68 homes per hectare – only slightly less than the 1970s slab blocks, shown here awaiting demolition

Lefevre Walk
Roman Road, Bow *1993-2006*

A golden age for estate regeneration and community empowerment

Lefevre Walk signalled a golden age for estate regeneration. In today's politically charged, spatially pumped and financially starved regeneration environment, it is hard to imagine an inner London post-war estate being replaced with family houses and low-rise flats for social rent with 100% grant funding and community empowerment at board level. Tower Hamlets Housing Action Trust was one of just six across England, generously funded to sort out estates and neighbourhoods with entrenched social, physical and economic disadvantage.

Following the later controversy over the demolition of Robin Hood Gardens – mourned by architects and loathed by its residents – it is also hard to imagine that in the age of Retrofit First, the Lefevre Walk blocks would be demolished at all. From an embodied carbon perspective, it is shocking that the estate failed so badly that it was replaced after less than 25 years.

The masterplan replaced existing 1970s slab blocks with 400 new houses and flats on tree-lined streets. At the heart of the new neighbourhood we created Lefevre Square, closing the view along Roman Road. A motorway boundary was designed as a city wall, protecting the new homes from the sight and sound of traffic. Large deck-access blocks were replaced by a 60:40 mix of houses and four-storey flats. This reintroduction of a traditional street layout and human scale achieved a remarkably high density compared to its 'brutalist' predecessor.

For Tricia Patel, one of PTE's third generation partners, the project launched a career in community engagement. Tenants had real power here, and we pioneered pre-digital methods of finding out what people want, which served us well for a couple of decades. What they wanted at Lefevre Walk was to replace the quarter mile long mid-rise 'Brutalist' slab blocks, sitting alongside the A12 urban motorway amid car parks and dog toilets, with houses and mansion flats on traditional streets. Some had lived in the terraced 'slum' houses which were cleared to make way for a brave new world in the 1970s.

We stayed in touch with some of the tenants for many years, and several of the professional development team became long-term housing association and local authority clients: June Barnes, Jackie Odunoye, Raj Upadhaya, Chris Johnson, Jeffrey Ruffels, Luke Riley and others.

Cherrywood Close
Coborn Road, Bow *1993-1997*

Expanding customer choice in the pre-digital age

This project was the first major new-build scheme by Tower Hamlets Housing Action Trust. The site, a long strip of derelict railway land, was acquired to provide permanent new homes for willing tenants from the Tredegar Road Estate. Once they moved in, demolition and redevelopment could start on the main estate.

The tapering slither of land is squeezed between a railway embankment carrying commuter trains between Essex and Liverpool Street, and the back gardens of 60 Victorian terraced houses. Each of those neighbours required a party wall award. We could just fit a single row of wide-frontage mews houses with large front gardens and tiny rear courtyards.

The project pushed tenant choice beyond the usual menu of paint colours and kitchen cabinets. Each could choose from a selection of internal layouts and elevational treatments – a forerunner of PTE's much more ambitious later foray into digital custom build.

It's also an example of a successful switch of architects under Design and Build. PTE dealt with the planning permission, resident choice programme and construction tender process, then acted as Employer's Agent to administer the contract, with MEPK doing an excellent job on the detailed design for contractor Marston. However, I found it quite conflicting to represent a very demanding client, protected by a rather one-sided D&B contract, while also trying to be fair to the contractor: ground contamination turned out to be much worse than revealed by the survey which we provided, and yet the contractor was expected to carry the whole cost.

Peckham Partnership
Southwark *1995-2008*

Transforming ‘problem estates’ into a connected mixed-tenure neighbourhood

‘Are those Calvin Klein glasses you are wearing?’ I will never know whether the heavily tattooed resident of the North Peckham estate, standing close and towering over me, was asking for an eye-wear recommendation or wanted to impress on me that I did not belong there. I was already feeling a little jittery, having walked to the meeting along the notorious yellow line, which threaded through the estate’s elevated walkways and blind-cornered stairways and lift lobbies, where ten-year-old Damilola Taylor would be murdered five years later.

Recently there has been much revisionist broadcasting about the regeneration of North Peckham and four adjoining estates, with an emphasis on the destruction of a cohesive community. The project, housing some 5,000 people and including 1800 new homes, was much the largest of its kind in London at the time, and it was a conscious exercise in social engineering and gentrification. (I am aware of using trigger words, including ‘regeneration’ which incense many people today, but we should speak plainly about these processes). The plan was to rehouse the existing residents – most in social rented homes within the new developments, but some (by choice) elsewhere in the borough – and to attract more affluent homebuyers to an area which they would never have considered before, and thereby dilute the concentration of poverty and anti-social behavior. It worked.

Was demolition justified? The council went diligently through the usual options appraisal process required by government, with an objective analysis of ‘do nothing’ and refurbishment options – the Estates Action programme was fresh in everyone’s minds, which left a sense that spending lots of money on physical remodelling did not really address the underlying problems. All I can say is that existing conditions on the estates were terrible and that the original design contributed significantly to the social and management problems. Some kind of radical change was required. Would we demolish today? Probably not, given the heightened sensitivity around estate regeneration, the enormous cost and consequent sky-high densities required to fund it, and the emphasis on embodied carbon and retrofit first.

At the time we certainly felt that we were engaging in genuine community involvement in the design process, with an exhaustive round of public meetings, steering groups and exhibitions – today, digital tools would enable us to reach many more people. At one point, Michael Hill of Countryside, with characteristic waspish wit, accused us of ’going native’. (Countryside and Laing were the council’s chosen private sector partners). The residents were well-informed and assertive, and would resent being labelled as unwilling victims of a top-down process by some of today’s revisionist commentators.

The project involved lots of people at PTE – including Steve Chance and Teresa Borsuk, who led the successive housing phases, and a young Roger Holdsworth as project architect. We also did a new church hall and community centre for St Luke's at the heart of the neighbourhood. My role was confined to the masterplan, where we collaborated with Alan Wright at BPTW (Alan being a PTE alumnus before setting up his own practice). The masterplan deliberately aimed to change the identity of the place from a series of self-contained estates into a connected piece of city. I remember Fred Manson, Director of Regeneration, like a reborn Baron Haussman, ordering us to make our central avenue even straighter, where we had tried to deflect it around some retained buildings.

It is a complex piece of urban design which knits together traditional streets with post-war estate planning. Some parts of the 1970s estates were retained following earlier refurbishment, but the remainder, including the notorious North Peckham estate, had become unworkable and were swept away.

In today's superdense London, the place looks rather 'under-developed', with lots of two- and three-storey terraced houses and small blocks of walk-up flats, and the architecture is modest and homely. We lost the struggle to make it 'tenure blind' – the housebuilders insisted that the homes for sale must look different from the homes for social rent. However, the change from what it replaced was totally radical, physically and socially.

Writing in The Independent Michael Farrell wrote:

'…well designed, attractive new houses, redesigned streets, new sports facilities. Above all, there is budding confidence for the future prospects of this fledgling multi-cultural community'.

Brindley Estate
Westbourne Grove *1998-2002*

Reconciling contradictions between placemaking and environmentalism

At Sefton Park we extended post-war tower blocks upwards to create more homes, and at the Brindley Estate we extended them sideways, with 110 new affordable flats in three eight- storey pavilions attached to (but not entered from) existing 20-storey towers. Like many estates of their era, the towers were orientated strictly east-west, surrounded by open space and presenting blank ends to the street and, in this case, the Regent's Canal. So, our new residents enjoyed views and balconies on this prime water frontage, directly opposite upmarket Carlton Gate (delivered by the same project architect, Dominic May).

It troubles me when environmentally conscious designers today focus on optimising solar orientation and neglect the existing urban or landscape context – have we learned nothing from the poor placemaking and perverse site planning of many postwar estates? We should make places first, and use detailed design to respond to the consequent relationship to the sun.

Sefton Park
Liverpool *1999-2009*

Modernising popular post-war tower blocks

At Sefton Park, we refurbished, remodelled and extended five tower blocks, providing 274 affordable homes, including new wheelchair flats at the base of the blocks and spectacular new penthouses on top, enjoying wonderful views over Sefton Park and the city centre. It is a rare example of tower block refurbishment for PTE.

Thanks to the residents of Lefevre Walk, PTE embarked on a ten-year adventure in Liverpool. We knew they would recommend us to the residents of Liverpool Housing Action Trust, and we duly won the commission to remodel six tower blocks at Sefton Park. Liverpool HAT had taken over from the council problematic estates across the depopulating city and set about demolishing many. However, Sefton Park was a popular location, and the towers there enjoyed access and views towards greenery and the celebrated Victorian Palm House. Residents wanted to stay and were prepared to put up with the disruption of major remodelling.

These were brick-clad blocks and, at 15 storeys, not tall by later standards.. Most of the work entailed a comprehensive upgrade, requiring the residents to move out for a year or more. There were enough surplus flats across the six blocks to provide temporary housing, and PTE's big idea was that, by adding more flats to five of the blocks, the sixth would be surplus to requirements at the end of the programme, and could be sold to the private sector to raise additional cross-subsidy. We duly inserted new flats into the undercroft and added an additional storey of 'social penthouses', which also proved a visible marker of the estate's rebirth.

See overleaf for the story of PTE Liverpool.

PTE Liverpool

After starting work on the Sefton Park project with a London-based team and a lot of time spent on Virgin 'pendolino' trains and in M6 traffic jams, we clearly needed to open a Liverpool office – to show commitment to the city as well as for reasons of efficiency.

I loved visiting Liverpool and combining business with tourism. The combination of splendid historic buildings with decaying empty sites seemed to offer endless opportunity.

PTE Liverpool ran for ten years, from 2000 to 2010, which places it in the next section of this narrative, but I will cover it here. Roo Humpherson had become a director and relocated to Liverpool during the week. He built up a great local team based in Merchants Court in the city centre, including Philip Lee and Peter Prescott. They won a series of housing projects in Liverpool and the North-West, most for housing associations and some for private developers.

However, we always struggled to make a profit – fees were lower than in London, but costs not much less. The cost to value relationship also made development viability a big challenge, and architectural quality harder to maintain. This sometimes created tension between the Liverpool office and London leadership. Sadly, the 2009 recession forced us to close the office and retreat from the North-West.

(Our only other venture into regional offices was PTE Brighton, which ran from 2005 to 2009. The proximity to London made it easier to run this as a satellite, but it too became unviable. I think the close control which we wanted to maintain was ultimately incompatible with the local autonomy which regional offices desire and require.)

Lotus Way, Jaywick Sands
Essex *1997-2000*

New clapboard homes revive coastal Plotlands

'Everyone who lives here loves it, everyone else slates it' - Jaywick resident describing PTE's 40 new timber homes for the Guinness trust, quoted in The Architects Journal feature by Nick Wates titled Shack Attack (November 2000). The local press dubbed it 'Dodgy City' because the untreated cedar cladding and shingles reminded people of an unfinished Wild West stage set. The Civic Trust gave it a Special Award for Rural Housing and the RIBA gave it a Housing Design Award. The Guardian, Independent and Telegraph all featured it.

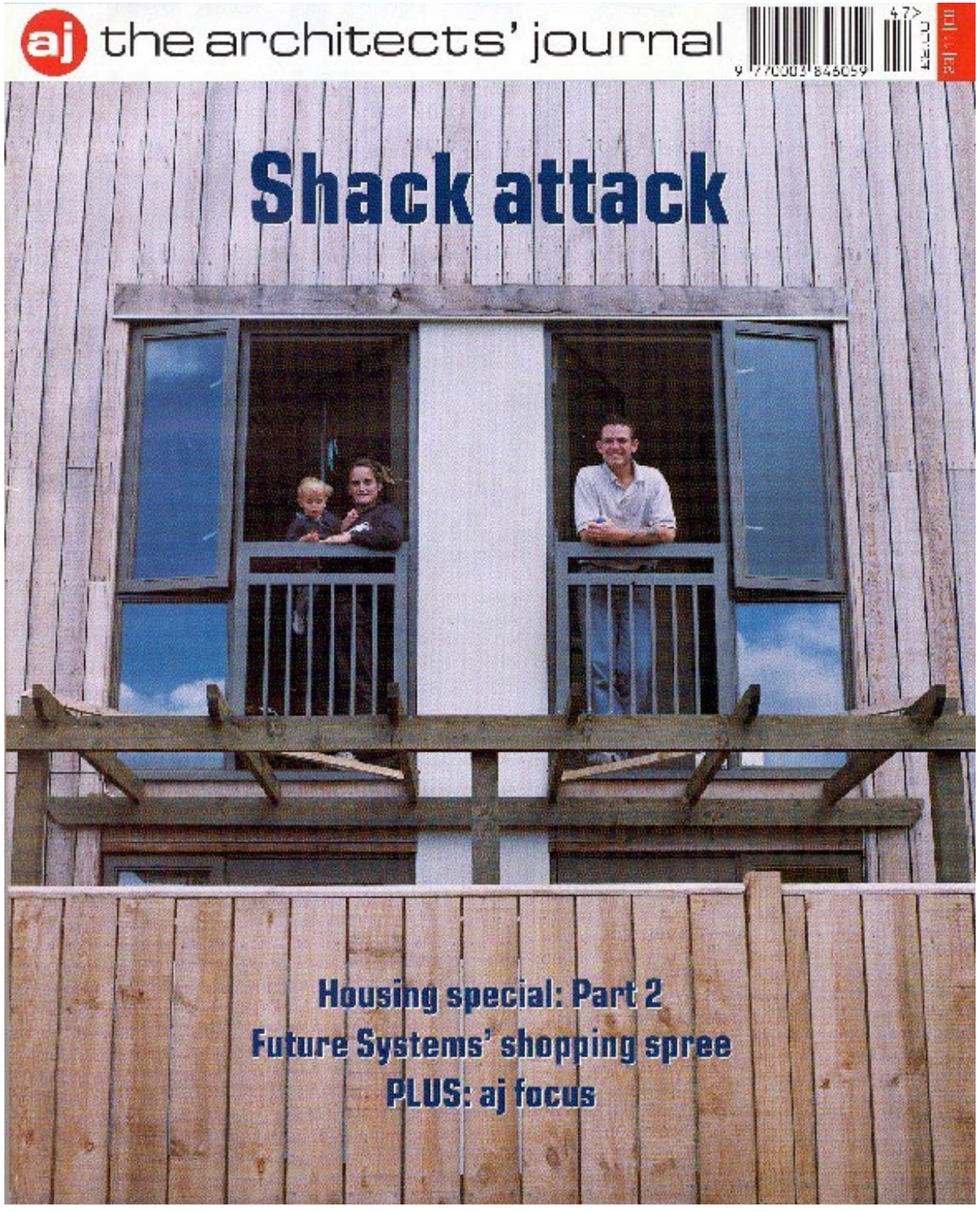
The people of Jaywick Sands are used to being in the news. In 2009 and 2015 it was assessed as the most deprived place in England. In 2018 an uncaptioned image of Jaywick was used in an attack ad in the US midterm elections to symbolise rural decay.

It was not always like this. Nick Wates wrote: 'Jaywick Sands…is the largest surviving 'plotlands' development in the UK and the most celebrated. It was founded in 1928 by an inspired fun-loving landowner, Jack Stedman, who sold small plots – 20ft by 50ft – with timber chalets for as little as £20. The main purchasers were traders and professionals from London's East End… Shops, cafes and entertainment venues sprung up, and Jaywick became a popular resort'. In her Story of Jaywick Sands Estate (2005) Mary Lyons recalls carefree childhood summers on the beach and social 'circles of happiness'. Her description reminded me of the thoroughly middle-class equivalent of Thorpeness village further up the coast, where I spent childhood holidays.

After the war the Brooklands area of Jaywick (where the streets are named after vanished British car manufacturers) evolved into a permanent settlement and then into a rural slum. The infamous 1953 North Sea floods drowned 35 people here. It became associated with criminality and drugs – a good place to hide out. There was little investment in infrastructure. Mains drainage only arrived in 1977. The streets were unpaved and unlit when we arrived on the scene, invited by long term client June Barnes, then head of The Guinness Trust. The chalets were bought up by private landlords and rented to families on benefits. Conditions were cramped and insanitary.

And yet, Jaywick stood for dogged individualism and resistance to outside interference. You could buy your own freehold plot for around £20,000 in the 1990s and nobody was likely to control what you built on it. It's a rare example of affordable self-build at scale in the UK.

For us, it was an opportunity to design a completely new set of rural coastal houses, which met modern space and technical standards, but captured the eccentricity and individuality of the plotlands. I admit that stylistic inspiration came as much from Charles Moore's California Sea Ranch as from Essex.



‘Everyone who lives here loves it,
everyone else slates it’

2000-2014

Business Planning can be Fun

For many years PTE had an aversion to overt business planning, and an undeclared belief that you cannot do much to control events, but you can be agile in responding to opportunities and threats. I think that it is largely my fault that we produced our first full blown Business Plan in 2007 - but more on that later. Nevertheless, the three founding partners used to meet regularly over drinks after work upstairs at Colebrooke Row to talk about business strategy and future planning, including succession. Once we became a company, every year or so the directors of PTE Limited (and later the Partners of PTE LLP) used to go away for a weekend of business planning and bonding. I suppose that as PTE and other businesses have become more committed to involving the whole organisation in the future of the business – and the number of Partners has expanded – such outings have become less practical and are perhaps viewed as a bit elitist.

The first business planning weekend I attended was around 1990 at Wortham Manor in Devon, rented from the Landmark Trust. We were thirteen people accommodated in a complex set of Medieval chambers, some accessible only through other rooms full of sleeping directors. I don't remember much about the business planning, but I do recall that we met in the great hall before a huge open fire: as the day progressed the smoke filled the Gothic rafters and gradually descended until we were enveloped in a soporific and eye-stinging miasma and had to evacuate. More time was spent procuring, preparing, eating and clearing away food and drink than in productive discussion, but PTE has always valued convivial cooking.

Other self-catering retreats took place in Thorpeness and Bath, but we soon realised that we would get more work done if we stayed in hotels, and there followed a succession of increasingly comfortable venues, culminating in several visits to Stoke Park in Buckinghamshire, designed by Benjamin Latrobe (who did the White House in Washington) and known to many for the golfing scene in 'Goldfinger'. The last of these was in February 2020, a few months before my retirement from the business.

We also realised that we needed a facilitator to help plan the agenda, keep us in order and distil the follow-up actions. We began with the affable John Worthington and ended with seven successive years from 2014 with my friend Mark Lee, both very wise mentors.

Teresa and I had worked for John at DEGW, and we first approached him in 1995 to help plan our new offices at Diespeker – the unstructured approach of letting each team plan its own space having created a sort of Moroccan souk. We started with a tour of DEGW's own showcase offices in Kings Cross where we encountered, for the first time, the themed nomadic workspace, where lap-top equipped workers roam from Hub to Hive to Homezone grazing on skinny lattes. On enquiry, our guide admitted that beyond a closed door lay the Heritage Zone where we found unreformed luddites (all older men) stooped over drawing boards in a haze of cigarette smoke. John insisted that we could not lay out our desks until we understood better who we are, and so began several years of corporate therapy – a brilliant business model in itself.

Even after sending numerous files to the shredder, I have copious records of our business planning retreats, the many papers which I prepared for them and the many action plans which followed. I rather cringe to read them now, but at the time I suppose I believed I could change the world and drag my colleagues with me through a linear process of problem analysis and solution. I rather neglected the emotional pull to keep doing things a certain way because that's how we like it.

The 2007 Business Plan was a major event, and the start of our succession planning – more of that later. To help shape and implement it we worked with Chris Metcalfe as facilitator. Chris's analysis of our shortcomings was perceptive and merciless. He said that Teresa, Steve and I ran our teams like separate 'baronies', not warring as such but not really collaborating either. I have not shown his appraisal of me to anyone – including my wife Diana – but I will share this extract: 'Although Andrew has some charm, a thoughtful nature, and a developed ability to engage with others quite effectively, his judgmental and intellectually rigorous side can overshadow these strengths. He can suddenly 'freeze', which is very disconcerting.' I think the rest can remain in a sealed envelope until my funeral.

One outcome of the 2007 plan was a move towards professionalising the support team, with specialists taking over most of the business administration previously done in part by architects. For the practice's first 25 years nearly everything – finance, premises, publicity and personnel - was done by lovely and super-competent Carol Aylett with a bookkeeper and a small team of secretaries. By 2008 we were 150 people with around 25 support staff, and we needed someone to manage the managers. I suppose the cultural gap between architects and non- architects meant we struggled to find and keep an over-arching business manager until we were fortunate to be introduced to marvellous Mary McDonnell, who became PTE's Finance Partner after 2014 and remains a key part of the practice. One business manager, who I shall not name, later found himself being interviewed by my brother (who chaired a yacht and interior design company) and claimed that he had rescued PTE from the neglect of its directors, who were too busy pursuing their property interests to care about the practice! Funny, foolish, false and jaw-droppingly rude. He didn't get the yacht job.

One challenge for a growing business is to ensure that everyone remains engaged, informed and listened to. Part of the default solution is the annual appraisal with every staff member. I always felt a bit uncomfortable with these, especially as they became formalised to comply with 'human resources best practice'. I didn't like the stark reminder of employer and employee status, and preferred informal chats over lunch. Some people, who were easy going and effective throughout the year, suddenly became difficult and demanding when asked to complete a form about their five-year personal plan. The reviews which stand out are the ones which went spectacularly off-piste, for example: 'My five-year plan is to own a MiG-21 fighter jet'; 'My five-year plan is to be selling jewelry on the beach in Barbados'; 'I refuse to participate in this patriarchal process'. There are no wrong answers.

Architects as Developers

Bill Thomas is an instinctive and inspired architect developer. Although devoted to selected clients, he pushed back against our profession's willingness to undersell its talent and skill to other people, who then made far more money out of the process than we did. I was very fortunate to learn from Bill – not through formal training, but just by listening and doing – how to weld together design talent, social commitment and commercial acumen to create popular and profitable ventures. My debt to Bill started way back with Majestic Court in 1986. I inherited Bill's passionate belief that architects can create great places – for their occupiers and the wider community – and make good profits. I owe my comfortable retirement to property development, not to conventional architectural practice.

Much later I gave a talk at the RIBA about the PTE approach to development:

Architects as Developers - RIBA Guerilla Tactics Conference November 2016

Not so long ago, the RIBA Code of Conduct did not permit architects to be directors of property development companies – it was considered ungentlemanly – we should not be sullying our pure ideals by intimate contact with the business world. In 1979 they changed the Code - just in time for the Thatcher era, the Big Bang in the financial markets and the property boom which followed.

How we got started
The founding partners of Pollard Thomas Edwards were among the first to take advantage. They began a series of property ventures, buying land and building new homes for sale in London, like the houses at ***Eldon Grove*** *in Hampstead.*

They focused on complex sites requiring clever solutions, places which others could not be bothered with. They used to say they would only look at sites with a high voltage cable running across the middle. They took on larger and more difficult projects. ***Lithos Road*** *in West Hampstead contained a gigantic substation, had restricted access and was sandwiched between two major railway lines.*

Majestic Court, Finsbury Park
Soon after joining the practice in 1984 as a Part 2 student, I got to work as project architect on ***Majestic Court****, a PTE development for 20 shared ownership apartments. It was a great education in how to design with a clear focus on the customer, the brief and the budget. Bill Thomas never let me forget that 'money is the only building material'.*

What is our business model?
Firstly, we ensure that development activity is legally and financially separate from the architectural practice.

Secondly, we set up single-purpose companies for each development. The shareholders are those directors of the architectural practice (now partners in our LLP) who wish to participate – and have the means to do so.

At the start, we raised capital by re-mortgaging our houses. We reinvested the proceeds of each venture into the next one, and for many years we took out little or no profit.

We prefer to fund all costs up to planning permission from cash – borrowing at this stage tends to be expensive.

On one project we widened the shareholding by inviting friends and relations to invest. It was a success, but the additional responsibility was a bit uncomfortable.

Who are our collaborators?
As our development projects have become larger we have tended to do them as joint ventures with other partners. This reduces our exposure and spreads our money further.

Although we prefer to build out, sometimes the more ambitious projects have been sold to a bigger developer with deeper pockets. We will have funded the planning permission and all the related approvals to create a development, which is oven-ready to build.

We have done several projects as 50:50 JV's with our regular partner Groveworld, a niche Islington-based developer. All decisions are made together, all costs and profit are split equally.

We have complementary skills – we lead on the planning and design, they lead on the funding, construction and marketing.

What is our product?
The first output is a planning permission. This crystallises the land value and enables us to raise development finance.

Sometimes we will sell with planning permission, other projects we will build out. It depends on the costs and risks, and the state of the wider market. When we have sold a site, the architectural practice has seen the project through with the new owner.

Because our projects are complicated, even the pre-construction process can take at least five years. ***Arundel Square*** *in Barnsbury took ten years just to line up the permissions – conventional developers, with sales targets to meet and shareholders to satisfy, could not afford to be so patient – but we could.*

It's also a good example of architects thinking laterally - and thinking big, beyond the site boundaries.

Bill Thomas bought at auction a scruffy builder's yard on a railway embankment. The big idea was to deck over the railway – thereby extending the fragmented Victorian Square and completing its missing fourth side. An awkward little site was transformed into the setting for about 150 apartments overlooking a re-landscaped London square.

The process of getting support from Network Rail, Islington Council and the local community required persistence, patience and ten years of investment of time and money– but in the end, the commercial and social returns made it all worthwhile.

Why do development? Commercial risk and reward
Firstly, the architectural practice gets to provide a consultancy service to the development company with a proper appointment and decent fees. We do expect initial work at risk and sometimes deferred payments, all to reduce the early development cashflow. Apart from that, the practice carries no risk.

The development business benefits from having minimal overheads – no separate premises or dedicated staff. This gives us flexibility to react to opportunity and to the economic cycle. We can choose to do nothing for a year or so.

Development risk and reward is quite different from a consultancy business.

Although you are using your skills and judgement to achieve the best end-result, you are also at the mercy of market forces, and lucky or unlucky timing can make all the difference. This makes development a risky business requiring significant financial exposure, but the potential gains outweigh our typical earnings from consultancy.

At ***Angel Waterside*** *on City Road Basin, with our partner Groveworld, we took additional risk by setting up our own construction company. After a long process of two-stage tendering with established main contractors, we found that we simply could not afford their prices – this was a time of steep build cost inflation. So, we built it by managing direct sub-contracts.*

We sold nearly all the 84 apartments in 2007 – just before the property crash. Timing is everything.

Why do development? The virtuous circle
We don't just do development to make money.

We do it because there is a virtuous circle between our core business of architectural consultancy and our secondary business as property developers.

It helps us to think like a client and to bring to our third-party clients the understanding and aptitude which we have learned as developers. Development takes up a small part of our time, but it has a big and positive impact on our ethos and brand.

Above all, it is incredibly empowering - and fun - to be able to link design and commerce in a such a direct way, and to be free to explore holistic solutions which produce the best combination of outcomes.

In the last ten years, all our development projects have been popular, profitable and won design awards. Hopefully, even the venerable worthies of the pre-1979 RIBA would approve.

Old Ford Road
Bow *1996-2001*

Reinventing the mansion flat for first-time buyers

In 1989 I became a director of PTE and began to invest in our property ventures and to create new development opportunities for the practice. This was one of the earliest – for 92 homes overlooking Victoria Park.

Tower Hamlets Housing Action Trust (see Lefevre Walk for background) had acquired a skinny triangular site with a long canal frontage and decided to do a mixed-tenure development there. Lacking experience in housing for sale, and following an open competition to find a developer, the HAT turned to PTE Services and affordable housing partner Southern Housing Group. We acquired planning permission and brought in Berkeley Homes for the private sale homes (and in due course as contractor).

I think this was the first time we developed what became a very common mansion block plan, with a pair of L-shaped two-bedroom flats wrapping around a pair of single aspect one-bedroom flats and sharing a compact stair core (with no lift). Every flat has an angled balcony overlooking the canal and the smaller flats also have bay windows. Space standards were very tight - 45 sqm for the smaller flats and 66 sqm for the larger ones – but they worked and were popular. One stack of flats also has a stubby industrial chimney embedded in the façade, the result of a late intervention by the canal preservation trust.

One family from Lefevre Walk moved into three homes at Old Ford Road: the parents into a social rented mews house; one daughter into a shared ownership flat; and another daughter was able to buy outright. Our deal with Berkeley homes included a discount for first-time buyers from PTE's staff, and five of our people (including one of today's partners) got their feet on the housing ladder. This was a truly integrated mixed tenure scheme, pre-dating the high prices and densities which have widened the social gulf between social renters and private buyers. It is also an early example of cross-subsidy from homes for sale replacing grant for affordable homes.

Old Ford Road, Bow

Rosemont Road
West Hampstead *1993-2000*

Final act in an exhausting saga of land assembly

Bill has written extensively about this in PTE's *Oral History*, and I will just add a coda.

Once we had completed the acquisition of the railway embankment and multiple separate properties backing on to it, fought off the spurious legal claim from a vexatious neighbour, and achieved planning permission, our patience and pockets were exhausted. We sold one property to PTE director Dominic May and our Communications Manager Wendy Ebringer (among several couples to meet at PTE, but that's another story) and they converted it into their home.

The residential development site we sold to Barratt Homes, who took us on as their delivery architects. They did not want the commercial office site, but they agreed to build it for us as contractors. So, we found ourselves in the position of vendors, architects and clients to Barratt – lots of scope for conflict there! I remember walking into their offices for the first time and smelling fear and testosterone. Their MD was terrifying, and we called him 'the rhino'. As so often in such organisations the people who actually delivered the scheme (Steve Day and Kevin Brewster) were entirely reasonable, and we happily reconnected much later on other projects.

Ironworks
Dace Road, Fish Island *2001-2005*

An unlikely partnership brings new studios to the pre-Olympic wild East

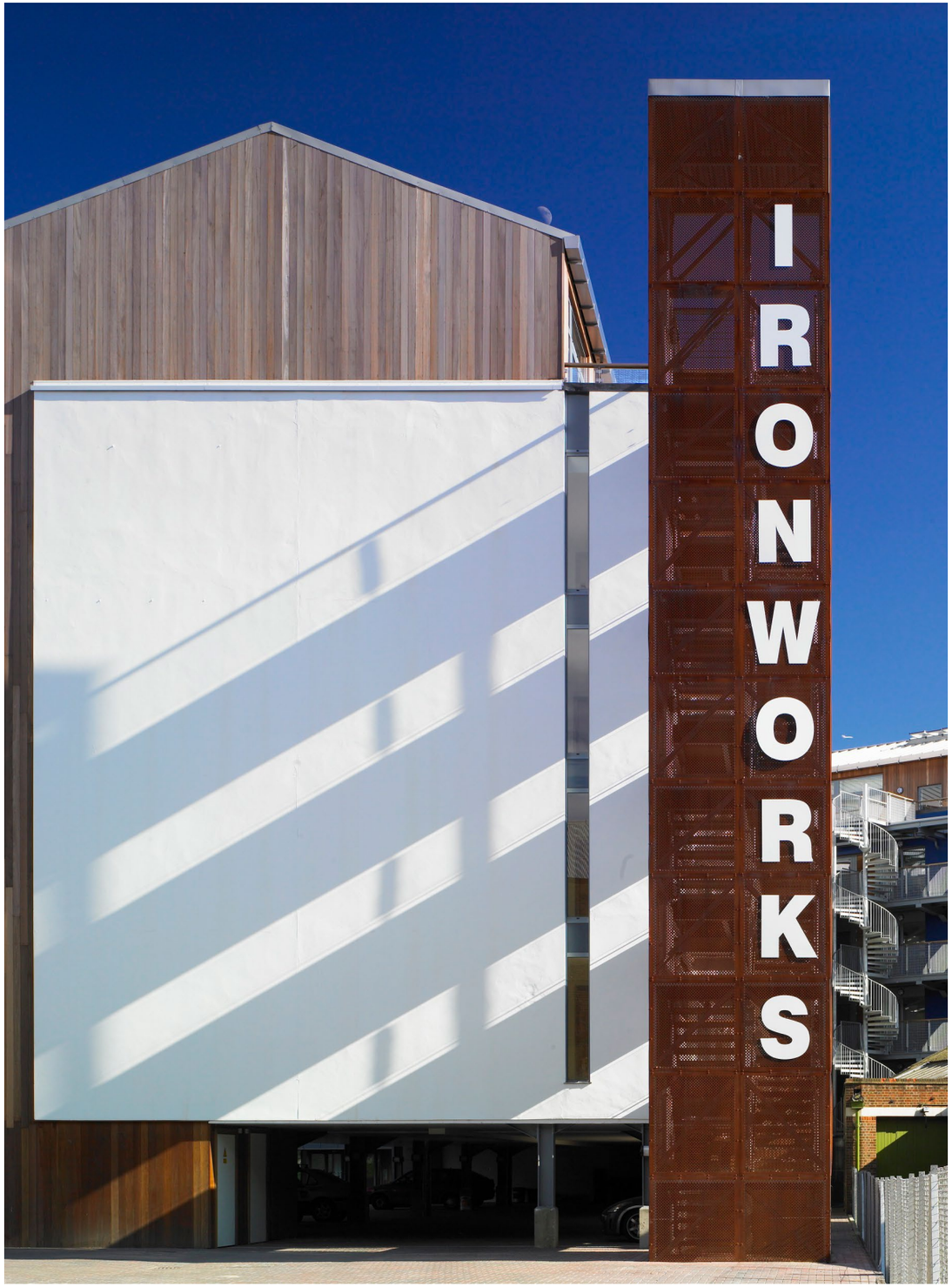
There was a time when all architects drove Saabs and all Islington architects had their Saabs repaired in a mews garage behind Upper Street – it's now a posh tailor. The garage owner sold the premises and used the proceeds to buy a dilapidated factory on Fish Island, long before the Olympics and the current development frenzy there. He did not know what to do next and so he turned to his architect clients (us) for help – and that was the beginning of a beautiful relationship with Frank Luke and his wife Pam.

Frank lived near Victoria Park and liked to wander around the dilapidated streets and towpaths of Hackney Wick and Fish Island. Old Ford Iron Works was one of the oldest registered businesses in England - it made cast-iron balustrades and stairs. By 1990 a workforce of 150 had reduced to one rather colourful owner and a dog, who saw off the property agents rattling his padlocked gate. Frank befriended him and, during canal trips together in a leaky boat, struck a deal to buy the place. Soon after, he also managed to buy the row of canal cottages on the opposite bank, which had been converted into the Big Breakfast TV studios, complete with swimming pool. This became his home – like a Surrey country house in the middle of London's biggest regeneration area.

We won planning permission for 77 spacious live-work units above commercial workspace, and a museum of industrial archaeology to be created by Frank in a retained factory building. We could not afford to build it, and we sold the site to developer Philip Green (no relation to the retail magnate), remaining as architects for the delivery and founding a long- term relationship with London Green. PTE's Dominic May and Adrie Rensen went on to deliver three other nearby projects with them.

Much has changed in Hackney Wick since the mid-1990s. It used to be an edgy and impenetrable place, with underused and derelict building stock from its Victorian factory- town past. When Stratford became the locus of regeneration, followed by the Olympics and their legacy, the spill-over transformed Hackney Wick into the well-connected, trendy place it is today. The penthouse in Ironworks became a BBC TV studio overlooking the Olympic stadium.

For a while Tower Hamlets and Hackney councils resisted change of use from industrial to residential, but allowed live-work, a loophole permitting units for small artisanal and desk-based businesses with living space above or in the shop. They came up with complicated design standards and planning conditions to try to prevent it being a fig leaf for residential development, but the market determined that the great majority of live-work units were occupied just as homes, and neither council had the means to enforce the permitted use. Fish Island's frontage to the Lea Navigation is now lined with very attractive 1,000 sqft apartments, which have proved perfect for post-pandemic working from home – so, things have come full circle.




The penthouse in Ironworks
became a BBC TV studio
overlooking the Olympic stadium

Crystal Wharf
Islington *2001-2008*

Every home is different on the best canal site in London

This PTE development on a former timber yard on City Road Basin, next to Diespeker Wharf, was an important milestone: the largest to date that we had built out; start of a long relationship with partners Groveworld; trigger for a wave of innovative school projects (on a linked site). We walked past it every day while working at Diespeker, and so it needed to look good and stay looking good. It has.

I worked on our first stage competition design, which was much more conventional than the excellent built scheme evolved by Bill Thomas, Steve Fisher and a young Roger Holdsworth as project architect. The competition presentation relied heavily on Karen Neale's watercolour sketches and quirky cartoons, a far cry from today's uber-cool CGIs.

The finished project was shaped by its intricate response to the context: three buildings of different character, different materials and different details, with each of the 64 flats having a different layout. Long before the current London Plan edict, every flat was 'dual aspect'. It is an approach which is hard to sustain today, when budgets and timescales demand standardised approaches. Even then, we could probably only achieve this degree of bespoke design on our own development. The timing was good, and the project made a decent profit for the development company and the architect – sadly not for the builder.

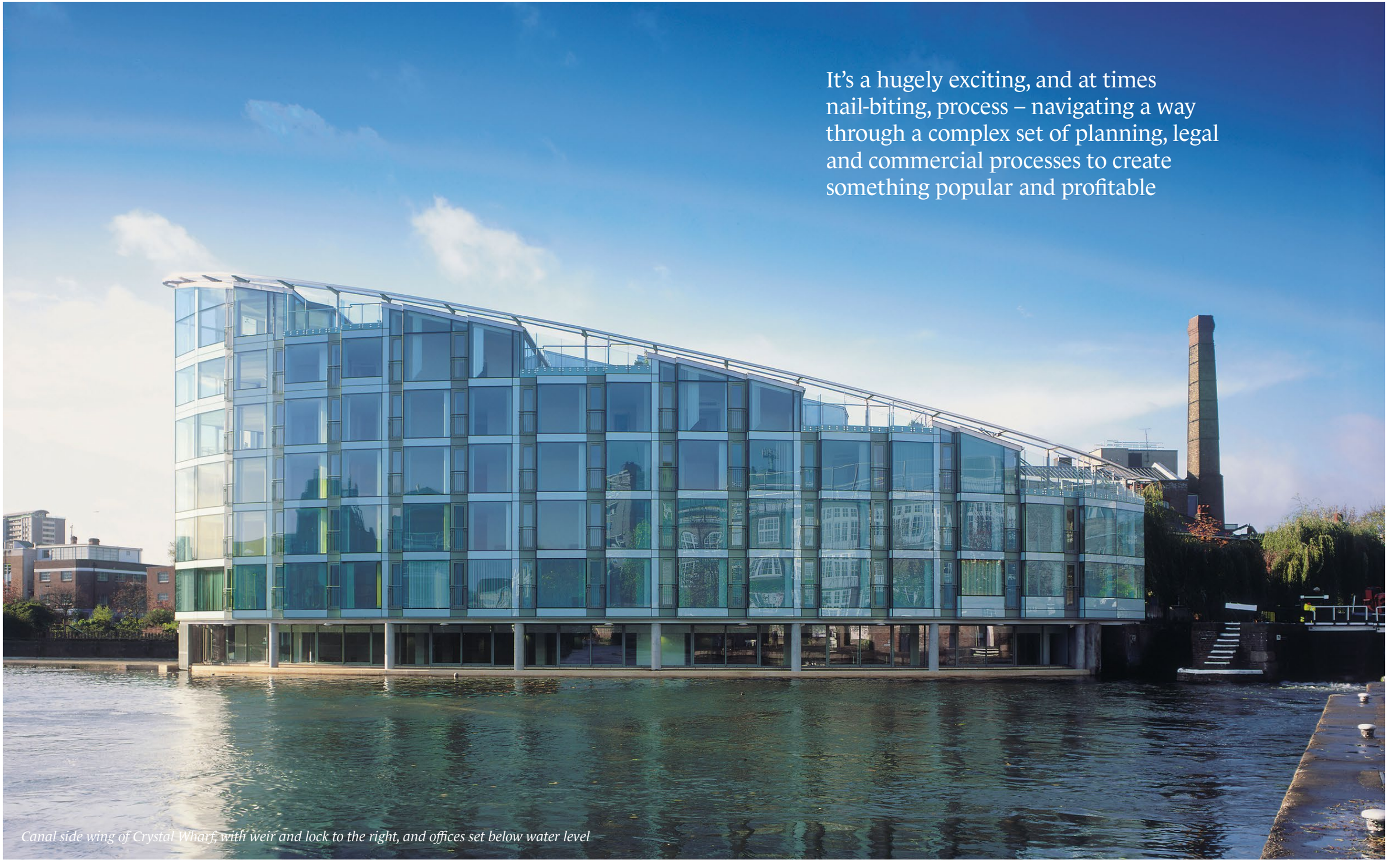
My ongoing role was to negotiate the formal agreements with landowner British Waterways and our development partners Groveworld, and I discovered a taste for complex legal documents and development appraisals. This was the start of a fruitful collaboration with Groveworld and its people over more than 20 years: Jeff Duggan, Lou Rokach, Ian Manson, Nick Morris, Robert Brayam and a succession of talented project managers. All our agreements included a 'Mexican shoot-out clause' in case of serious disagreement. We have had some tricky moments along the way, but have never invoked it, and every project has ended well: Crystal Wharf, Angel Waterside, Stone Studios, Wallis North – and St Jude and St Paul's School, which I will cover with PTE's other school projects.

Crystal Wharf also included two office suites – a small one on Graham Street, which we retained, and a larger one, which later became the studios of architects Stanton Williams. On completion, we held an exhibition in the larger waterside unit, where the floor is set 600mm below canal level. We arranged, along a miniature waterway, models of our many canal and riverside projects. Two hours before the launch party some unexpected guests turned up: two burly bailiffs in dark suits – and my eldest brother, come from rural Wales to say hello. I had to keep them apart, like in a stage farce. We were in dispute with Islington Council about an unpaid rates bill (their error) and the bailiffs politely threatened to confiscate all the audio-visual equipment and lighting for our exhibition. A swift call to our lawyer established that the only way out was to pay up and argue later.

Another unusual guest around that time was Deputy Prime Minister John Prescott. British Waterways used Diespeker to launch a new initiative to bring freight back on to the canal system, and former merchant seaman Prescott arrived by barge to make a rousing speech (having presumably parked his ministerial Jaguar around the corner). The film Titanic had recently hit the cinemas, and the Islington Tribune marked his appearance with a pre-photoshop mock-up of Mr Prescott with Kate Winslett leaning over the bow.

Visitors to PTE's Water Works exhibition (2008) in the newly completed canal side office at Crystal Wharf

It's a hugely exciting, and at times nail-biting, process – navigating a way through a complex set of planning, legal and commercial processes to create something popular and profitable



Canal side wing of Crystal Wharf, with weir and lock to the right, and offices set below water level

Stone Studios
Hackney Wick *2011-2018*

Loft apartments subsidise creative workspace and new connections

In London, the pressure to provide new homes was displacing employment floor space and pushing up commercial rents. Stone Studios resolved this dilemma by setting homes above 50,000sqft of working studios for the creative industries, including subsidised affordable workspace. 120 loft apartments occupy a set of five adjoining buildings within a network of yards and lanes. The development also delivered a new public route connecting Hackney Wick station with Queen Elizabeth Park.

Ironworks and Stone Studios are separated in time by the London 2012 Olympics, the creation of the London Legacy Development Corporation and the accelerated regeneration of Hackney Wick and Fish Island. The transformation of the London Legacy land, including creation of the Queen Elizabeth Park, is surely Britain's most outstanding urban regeneration project in recent decades – read Dave Hill's book *When Britain Built Something Big* to understand the background and feel good about the UK.

A phone call from Groveworld's Lou Rokach started our 12-year adventure on Wallis Road in Hackney Wick, which extended across multiple potential sites and endless masterplans. Lou had already spent some years cultivating relationships with various landowners in the area, and he had achieved some temporary options on sites. This is property development through patient land assembly and handshakes, not formal bidding processes, investing time and money which could all be wasted if the landowner turns out unreliable or untrustworthy. Fortunately, the Stone brothers were neither. Their family had manufactured (and then imported) architectural ironmongery here since the 1950s, and like other surviving local businesses they wanted to move to modern premises with better road connections.

We dusted off our collaboration agreements from earlier projects: equal investment of capital with equal risk and reward; separation of skills and tasks; formal professional appointments for the project team, whether related (PTE architects and Groveworld project management) or third parties.

It's a hugely exciting, and at times nail-biting, process – navigating a way through a complex set of planning, legal and commercial processes to create something popular and profitable. Dealing with the LLDC was like wading through treacle, but I came to respect their very prescriptive approach, and they deserve great credit for protecting Hackney Wick and Fish Island from a post-Olympic high-rise look-at-me development frenzy. What is emerging instead is an intricate street network, preserving the better industrial buildings and replacing tatty sheds with robust brick mid-rise apartments and workspace. Some complain that it all looks the same, but I think that's a compliment. The designers have to work harder to distinguish their work through subtle variations in detail and material. Others complain

about gentrification, and the exclusion of artists and residents from cheap post-industrial temporary floorspace, but that is how a dynamic city works, and much has been done here to create new and permanent affordable workspace and homes.

After a five-year planning process, we achieved permission, but our energies and pockets were depleted. We nearly lost the site, when our deadline to complete the purchase approached and negotiations with banks dragged on through endless credit committees. My brother recommended a contact who used private investors to fund bridging loans, Jeff Duggan and I drove out to Borehamwood to borrow five million pounds at an eye-watering interest rate from a young man called Danny, and the project was saved.

We decided to sell the site with planning permission to Telford Homes, and were disappointed (verging on outraged) that they chose other architects for the working drawings. However, the end-result is a great success and faithful to our design. Savills told us that it was their best-selling development in London, and that three of their agents had bought flats there.

Stone Studios is one of several projects where I worked with Hamish Kilford-Brown, a very talented designer and draughtsman – I have kept several of his pencil sketches.

What is emerging here is an intricate street network, preserving the better industrial buildings and replacing tatty sheds with robust brick mid-rise apartments and workspace

Wallis North
Hackney Wick *2011-2023*

The one that got away

If you think property development is an easy way to make money, then read on. In October 2020, after nine years of negotiations, we finally achieved resolution to grant planning permission (from a rather truculent LLDC planning committee) for this modest development, which conformed to the LLDC's own masterplan. However, we were unable to implement the consent. Here's why.

Firstly, the process took so long that the market had turned. Financial appraisals based on sales values outstripping construction costs were no longer viable – values were stagnating, and costs were rocketing post-Brexit and post-pandemic. Planning policies adopted in easier times were now strangling developments of housing for sale, which could no longer afford to deliver loss-making commercial space, affordable housing, public realm improvements and a host of other financial contributions required by the planning authority.

Secondly, we had bought two out of three identical and non-descript industrial sheds with shared access land. Our strategy required the cooperation of the third landowner, who preferred to retain ownership. Over a ten-year period, we 'agreed' a series of collaboration scenarios for coordinated development, but none was formally contracted, and our neighbour turned out to have a commitment problem – we spent well over £100,000 on abortive legal fees.

In the end we sold our site to a specialist co-living developer – that's a sort of student housing for grown-ups – who also managed to deal with our difficult neighbour. They employed a good architect (Morris and Co) and have recently won planning permission for a scheme which looks quite like ours, but bigger. So, it will have a happy ending. It's frustrating not to build our project after all that effort, but sometimes you have to know when to quit.

Hackney Wick – home to the densest concentration of artists' studios in Europe – is central to London's success as a world leader in the creative industries, and our project at Wallis North transforms low-grade warehouses into a complex of creative workspace, a café and homes.

Located at a key crossing point from Wallis Road into Queen Elizabeth Park, it forms a complete urban block, complementing PTE's completed project at Stone Studios opposite.22,000 sqft of double-height commercial space sits below 49 mixed-tenure flats, arranged around a landscaped courtyard and topped by a roof garden. The layout of the deck access homes enables all to be dual aspect. Brickwork piers, arches and spandrels create a handsome mixed-use 'palazzo' recalling the area's industrial past.

Made in London

This rapid-fire PechaKucha talk I did for New London Architecture at Diespeker in 2014 explains the background to Diespeker, Ironworks, Crystal Wharf and later Hackney Wick projects.

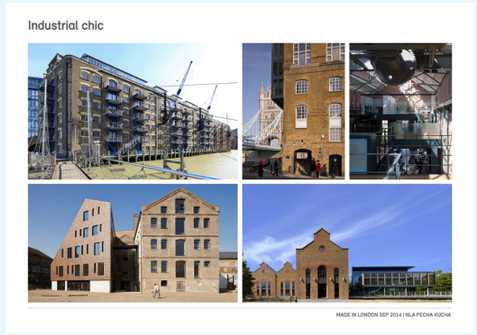
I am going to speak about how some of London's industrial areas have changed in the 40-year lifetime of this practice – and how they continue to evolve.

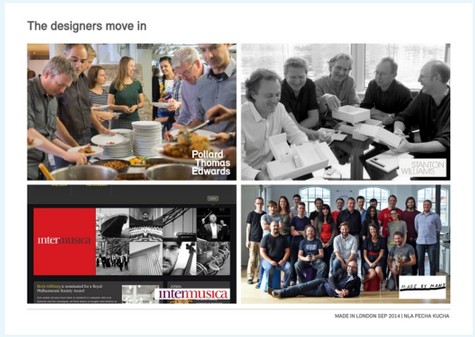
Dickens
This building used to be a place where Londoners made things. Where you are sitting there was machinery to mill timber, which was unloaded from barges on the Grand Union Canal. When Bill Thomas bought it from British Waterways in 1993 it was still used for industry.

A nice clean shed with access to the M25
Diespeker made marble and terrazzo products here. But like most industries seeking to modernise they wanted a nice clean shed with better transport access, and they were happy to relocate to south London. They are quite unusual – many other industries have left altogether – for the M25 – or China.

Decline and flight of the makers
The same story has been repeated across London. Up until 1960, 1.5 million people worked in manufacturing of some sort – nearly 50% of the workforce. By the end of the century it was less than 10%.

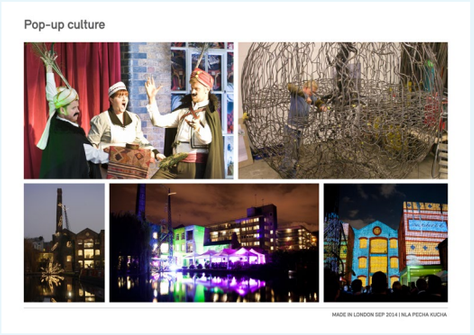
Industrial chic
Where old industries have abandoned London sites and left handsome building stock – as in Shad Thames, Clerkenwell, Shoreditch and Hoxton - new uses have been quick to move in. Here are just a few buildings which PTE has converted over the years – either for residential or office use or a mix of both.





The designers move in
Diespeker and our Crystal Wharf development next door now contain: two architectural practices, a music publisher and a leading creator of apps for your smartphone. We call ourselves creative businesses: we design things, but we don't make them here. Does that count towards Made in London?

Pop-up culture
Like many businesses, it makes us feel good to be associated with people who make things – here are some recent creative events held here. You may have noticed some unusual objects in the courtyard. Sculptors need a lot of space, and Matt Lane Sanderson (who works in metal and uses some heavy kit) could not afford studio space in London. He now works in the Welsh Borders.



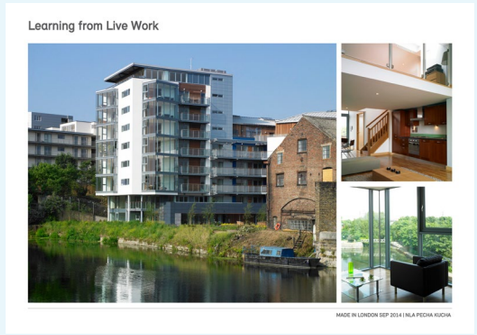
Factory Town
Meanwhile in another part of London the process of change has taken a different course. Hackney Wick and Fish Island became a Victorian factory town, making everything from confectionary to chemicals to cardboard boxes. After WW2 the houses and shops gave way to factories and warehouses alone.

The limitations of planning
As old industries moved out, planners and politicians tried to hold on to the jobs through policies restricting change of use. They failed to stem the flight of employment, but they did slow the pace of change, even after the adjacent Stratford railway lands were chosen for the London Olympics.

Cleaning up the ironworks
Old Ford Iron Works was one of the oldest registered businesses in England - it made cast-iron balustrades and stairs. By 1990 a workforce of 150 had reduced to one rather colourful owner and a dog, who saw off the property agents rattling his padlocked gate. It's a long story, but PTE ended up buying the place with a local car mechanic.

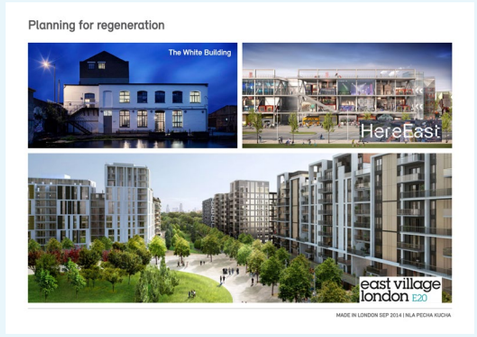
Live Work Loophole
The exception to the ban on change of use was the live-work loophole, which permitted units for small artisanal and desk- based businesses with living space above or in the shop. Hackney and Tower Hamlets came up with complicated design standards and planning conditions to try to prevent it being a fig leaf for residential development.

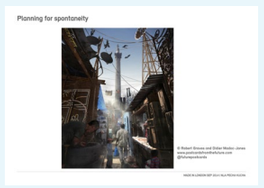
Learning from Live Work
But the market determined that the great majority of live-work units were occupied as pure residential, and neither council had the means to enforce the permitted use. Fish Island's frontage to the Lea Navigation is now lined with very attractive 1,000 sqft apartments.



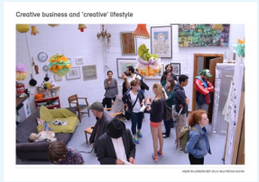
Creative Factories in Hackney Wick and Fish Island
But something else happened. While planners bolted the stable door on live-work, artists began to colonise vacant and under-used old factories and warehouses. Today the area contains around 600 studios for artists and makers - supposedly the highest concentration in Europe.

Planning for regeneration
So, all eyes are on this area next to Stratford City and the Olympic Park. Regeneration is now promoted by planning policies, which seek to balance redevelopment with retention of 'heritage assets' – nice old buildings - and to combine new homes with space for the Cultural and Creative Industries.





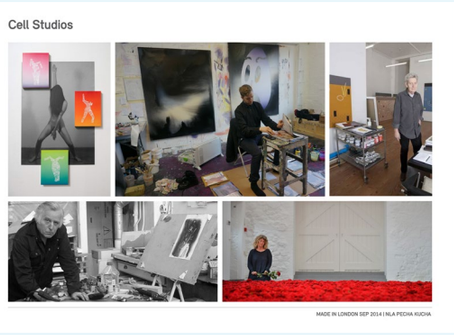
Planning for spontaneity
But how do you use the conventional tools of plan-making and development control to foster a movement which defines itself through spontaneity and defiance of rules. The creative community likes Hackney Wick because it is cheap, temporary, bohemian and full of picturesque decay. For some people 'regeneration' is second cousin to 'gentrification'.



Creative business and 'creative' lifestyle
Another dilemma is to figure out who these new policies are designed to protect and attract. Some of the artists are established talents with international reputations – and others will become so. But for many the attraction of the area is about lifestyle – it's as much about the leisure economy as the creative one.

The Montmartre of 21st Century London?
Maybe it can be like Montmartre in 1900 – a cauldron of artistic genius and delicious vice. Or maybe it will go the way of Hampstead, which was London's hilltop Montmartre – but is now the exclusive playground of Parisian bankers.

Stone Brothers – from manufacturing to distribution and now to 'creative industry'
We are trying to square this circle in the redevelopment of Stone Brothers, next to Hackney Wick station. This family business used to make architectural ironmongery, but now they import it. They are moving to a new warehouse in Canning Town, and PTE is buying the place with our development partner Groveworld.



Cell Studios
We are working with Cell Studios, who provide low-cost space to serious artists and makers. We plan to develop around 50,000sqft of new studios and to expand the offer to include desk-based design businesses as well as fine-artists.

Mixing it up – our proposal
This time the living and the working will be in separate units, but integrated into one complex of five buildings. New apartments will create the value to fund the workspace and to keep the rents affordable.

La Boheme with underfloor heating
We have not completely given up on live work. Our loft apartments will have flexible plans with an option of large north- lit studios in the roof-space. But they are for well-heeled artists only – not the struggling absinthe addicts of La Boheme.

Connaught Gardens
Muswell Hill *2003-2009*

Reinventing the Townhouse

I owe my home to PTE's developing urge. Unlike nearly all the other PTE developments, this one is not on former industrial or rail land and it is in the suburbs.

I used to scan the auction catalogues and spotted land for sale in Muswell Hill, a mile or so from my then home in Hampstead Garden Suburb. I was havering about whether to go for it – auctions require a lot of prior due diligence for an uncertain outcome - when the Patel Brothers (Bill's partners at Goswell Road) approached us about the same site. We went to the auction together, I put my hand up, and we bought the land for 1.5 million pounds. We formed an equal partnership with the Patels, and the rest is history.

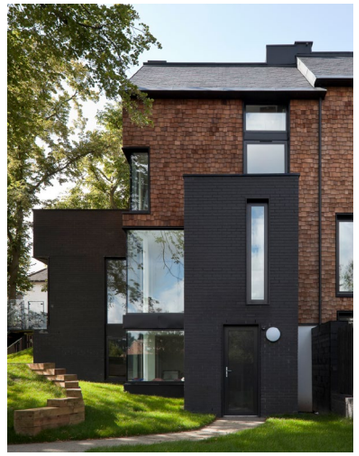
The site was steeply sloping. It contained several safeguarded trees and a very dilapidated Edwardian villa, with an unusually robust basement, rumoured to have been last used as a police safe house. We quickly worked out that we could fit seven narrow frontage townhouses on it. The end-house would be special, designed around the tree preservation zones and having a large woodland garden.

It took three years, including two failed appeals, to achieve planning permission, and another three years to build it. Despite our best efforts at consultation, my future friends and neighbours were resolute in opposition and Haringey twice refused us. The final design benefited from this extended evolution, but it is not really very different from the one we started with. On completion, our neighbours graciously said how much they liked it, Haringey kindly gave it a design award, and there were many other plaudits, including a special Housing Design Award for the best house plan.

My position as a participant in the development company and a purchaser of the end-house contained the seeds of potential conflict, and my partners were very forbearing and generous – especially as the delays meant that we missed the market cycle, and the development was not very profitable. I also enjoyed the luxury and privilege of having PTE translate my rough sketches into reality. Steve Fisher led the development process and Teresa Borsuk led the design, with project architect Carl Vann, a future leader of PTE and consistently the best dressed man in the practice.

After 15 years we are still very happy living here and will only leave when we are unable to climb the four flights of stairs. It was no hardship to be confined here during the pandemic, and I made a short film about it. Here is what I said.

Living at Connaught Gardens – 15 years on



My house in North London is one of a terrace of seven, on a lane set at right angles to the public street. It's part of a PTE development, completed in 2009. The others are regular town houses, but ours turns the corner, and the flank becomes the front. The plot is steeply sloping and dominated by large lime trees.

There is no conventional back or front – the garden wraps around the house. You enter from the street at the lowest point and ascend beneath the trees to the raised main living floor. It is quite a revelation for visitors, including weary delivery drivers, who often pause for a while on the threshold enjoying the garden – at its best in the early summer.

Although we joke about living in a 'compound', our secret garden is visible to our neighbours, to whom we can wave from our raised doorstep. The distant views of Alexandra Palace and East London are spectacular. There is always something to see in the changing skyline and seasons. The house is all about capturing views.

We clad one side of the house in cedar shingles to enhance the illusion of being in a wood. The other side is finished in white render, black brick and dark grey metal. It's a homage to our black and white 1930's Tudorbethan neighbours.

The main rectangle of our town house is extended by three brick boxes, precisely located to avoid the tree root protection zones and give us the largest achievable footprint. We wanted all our daytime spaces on one level and interconnected – each is a 'room' with its own character, but they flow together around the central stair core: hall, dining room, kitchen, living room and a tiny study like an inglenook tucked behind the hearth.

The ceilings are quite low, to fit four floors within the planning parameters, and so I was determined to have a double-height dining room and gallery. This is the heart of the home where we spend a lot of time.

The other houses have their family kitchen and dining room at the lowest level – but we have a separable flat with its own entrance. The idea was that our sons could live independently in the house when they grew up – and maybe we could capture them to become our carers. I had a vision of a multi-family complex with three generations or more under one roof. However, soon after we finally moved in my sons were off to university, then returned and then flew the nest permanently.

So, now we have more space than we planned on, and we have taken over our sons' rooms for work and hobbies. Clerestory windows bring south light into my study, and one of my favourite views is from the child's height floor-level window – perfect for on-line yoga classes.

This house does not fetishize materials and details – fittings and finishes are quite ordinary and inexpensive, apart from the full-height doors and egg-shaped door handles – a pleasure to touch.

When we planned this house, we could only guess at the views and light effects - today I suppose we would model them with clever computer programmes – and so it was a real revelation when we moved in – and years later we are still discovering new conjunctions of view, season and light. It's a house which keeps on giving.

Learning and Living

Acting as architect developers led us into new places and sectors, which would otherwise have been harder to penetrate. From 2001 PTE built up a substantial portfolio of education projects.

This is how it started.

St Jude and St Paul's Primary School
Islington *2001-2005*

London's first new school with homes above

When we developed Crystal Wharf, planning policy was relatively flexible about providing affordable housing on a separate site in the borough. (This seems to me an admirable policy if it achieves more and better affordable homes, but now it is treated with some suspicion by the 'poor doors' police). We bought a site on King Henry's Walk and obtained planning permission for a terrace of affordable family houses. Our neighbour was a small Church of England primary school, with an ambitious head and governors, but truly terrible multi-level premises.

You know something is a great idea when several people claim authorship. Somehow, between PTE and the diocesan property people, 'we' came up with the idea of combining the two sites, building a new school across the expanded area and part-funding it by building affordable flats above. The school could all be at ground-level with a splendid hall and decent playground. The flats had separate access via a 'street' at first floor level.

So, we tore up our planning permission for houses, designed a completely new scheme with the school, brought a housing association (ISHA) on board, and negotiated a complex development agreement between the PTE Groveworld entity and the Diocese, which also contributed top-up funding. (I remember clearly the planning committee meeting on 11 September 2001, not so much for the councillors' enthusiasm, which was appreciated, but because terrible news from New York started to filter into the chamber).

The success of this project – the first of its kind - led to the article overleaf in the Times Educational Supplement (TES) and to a series of subsequent projects combining schools with homes.

St Thomas' Primary School
North Kensington *2003-2009*

Funding a new school (almost) entirely from homes above

The Diocese asked us (as architects but not developers) to repeat the St Jude's idea on a larger school site next to iconic Trellick Tower. We introduced them to a big national housing association Places for People, who acted as lead developer this time.

Income generated by the sale and rental of apartments built above the school financed over 80 per cent of the cost of rebuilding St Thomas's. The new school provided more and better classrooms, each one opening onto a landscaped play space and garden. An external stair leads up to a sculptured metallic assembly hall which sits centrally between the two residential wings and marks the principal entrance. This central block housing the hall, studio, foyer and community room is designed so that it can be used by the community out of school hours. St Thomas' received the Innovation and New Ventures Award from the Homes and Communities Agency in 2010.

TES FRIDAY 06.01.06

Teachers are used to taking their work home. But how would you feel if home was the flat above your classroom? **David Newnham** visits an innovative building project that literally brings a community closer together

Upstairs, downstairs

For Ganxhe Mikeli, getting her five-year-old Xhulio to his north London school in the morning could hardly be easier. Not for her the rigours of the school run or the frustrations of public transport. For St Jude and St Paul's CE primary is just downstairs.

The smart first-floor flat which Ms Mikeli rents from the Islington and Shoreditch housing association is one of 24 affordable new homes in a four-storey block whose entire ground floor is occupied by Xhulio's school. Not that you would know, looking out from Ms Mikeli's south-facing lounge window, that there were a couple of hundred young children working and playing downstairs. For this innovative project – the architects believe it is the first example in the UK of a school with housing above – was designed from the outset with the sensitivities of all its occupants in mind.

School and flats have separate exits and entrances, and every detail, from the level of the kitchen window sills to the height of the stylish iroko balconies, has been carefully thought out. The result is that, whereas many inner-city schools are overlooked by high-rise flats, St Jude and St Paul's is unusually secluded, despite sharing the same triangle of earth with two dozen homes.

When headteacher Marjory Wood took up her post eight years ago, St Jude and St Paul's was split between two sites, with an infants' school on one side of a busy road, and a run-down junior school on the other. The junior school itself was tightly sandwiched between a historic cemetery and a derelict, rat-infested factory, which in turn was perched on the very edge of a railway cutting. "In our last Ofsted report, the accommodation came out as poor, and it couldn't have got any worse," says Mrs Wood. "I was running backwards and forwards 14 times a day, the admin office was in a cottage, and we had to use mobiles because there was no phone connection down there."

Enter Pollard Thomas Edwards architects (PTEa), whose associated development company was in the process of buying the disused factory with a view to building family houses on the site when it became aware of the school's predicament. "We always talk to neighbours, just to say what we're up to," explains PTEa's director, Andrew Beharrell. "We learned of their aspiration for a new school, and immediately saw the scope to combine the sites and provide a bigger and better school."

There then ensued two years of negotiations between, among others, the London Diocesan Board for Schools, the Department for Education and Skills, the Islington and Shoreditch housing association and various departments of the local authority. "One reason the project came about," says Mr Beharrell, "was that Islington council had more than one objective. The housing department wanted affordable housing and the education department saw an opportunity for a new school.

"The problem was how to fund it. Eventually, they were able to obtain a DfES grant, and I think the department was more willing to give the money because it knew there was a private sector 'subsidy' coming with the flats on top."

It is an idea that could catch on in the south-east, where land is expensive and there is government pressure to build more homes. Given that schools generally use the land they occupy for a limited amount of time, it obviously makes sense to build housing above. And where that housing can provide the school with capital or a regular income, arguably everyone benefits. In Islington, the flats were used to generate capital that partially offset the cost of the new buildings, says Mr Beharrell. "But if you had a surplus, you could equally imagine a scenario where a school retained some flats, either for its own housing purposes or for income. And it makes more sense than selling off bits of land and trying to fit the school on to what's left."

PTEa is now working on a number of similar projects for the London Diocesan Board, of which the slightly larger St Thomas's primary school in north Kensington is at the most advanced stage. Here, if the scheme gets planning approval, the considerable costs of building a spacious and striking new school will be funded almost entirely by the provision of around 55 flats on four floors above. And, once again, it seems to be the only way that the existing run-down premises are going to be replaced in the foreseeable future.

But while St Jude and St Paul's is tucked away and almost invisible from the surrounding streets, the plans for St Thomas's depict a much more extrovert structure. An eye-catching central studio hall rises to full-height between two flanking residential blocks, its first-floor connected to the playground by an extravagant spiral ramp which shelters an outdoor theatre. The intention is that this large performance space will be available to both the school and, out of school hours, to the people who live in the flats above.

The two projects won PTEa the Innovation of the Year award at last November's Regeneration Awards for architecture. PTEa was also named Regeneration Architect of the Year.

So does this physical coming together of living and working spaces herald a breaking down of the traditional barriers between school and home? Might there come a time when little Xhulio is not the only child who sleeps over his classroom – a time, even, when the staff themselves live upstairs? While two of the St Jude's flats have indeed been let to teachers, both work at other local schools. And Colin Archer, of the Islington and Shoreditch housing association, reckons that's about as far as this particular trend is likely to go. "My wife is a teacher," he says, "and I think the thing she would like least of all is to live over the shop. It's hard enough when she's recognised in Sainsbury's."

www.ptea.co.uk

Song and dance: (above and far right) the new outside space at St Jude and St Paul's; great attention was paid to details such as the height of window sills (second from right) and the iroko balconies attached to the homes above the school (right); Ganxhe Mikeli and five-year-old Xhulio on the stairs to their flat (third from right) Photographs: Richard Lea-Hair

Co-location and Schools

‘Dear Mr Tatters. My name is Natalia. I am in Kingfisher. I am 6 years old. In the new school I really like the playground because is spectaular. My favret part is the ofis because is cool. I wood change nothing because I like efrifing. Thanq w Mr Tatters.’

Both the Diocesan school projects were a success for staff and pupils, and they won lots of awards and national press coverage. The model was clearly repeatable, and nobody else had done it. Although secondary schools were benefiting from the Building Schools for the Future programme, primary schools were short of funding. Their one asset was land, and they often under- occupied potentially valuable urban sites with sprawling and ageing low-rise buildings, which were unoccupied a lot of the time. It may seem obvious now – and lots of architects and local authorities are doing it – but at the time it was groundbreaking.

In 2011 we engaged in a major promotional initiative to expand our work in the education sector, including the article below, written to coincide with the independent school bursers’ conference.

This is a rare example of a new business campaign by PTE trying to expand into a relatively new sector for us. We also wrote to every state school and every local authority in London. We hired Andrew Armes, former Head of Architecture at Milton Keynes to help spread the word.

With the private schools we completely failed. My old prep school bursar did invite me down to Ascot to discuss a ‘major project’. I duly went, taking Kaye with me, only to be given a tour of the toilets and asked whether we could do a free upgrade scheme.

We were more successful in the public sector, and we struck gold in Lewisham. We were contacted by Mark Elms, charismatic head teacher of Tidemill School in Deptford, and David Booth, a consultant to the council appointed to push forward their regeneration programme.

David was an accountant and self-confessed novice when it came to planning and design – very smart and very driven, he had no patience with bureaucratic delay, and proved an excellent client who got things done.

Independent Education Today April 2011

London based practice PTEa have developed an innovative and insightful approach that delivers outstanding educational facilities, community interaction and real financial benefits.

If you are strolling down Giffin Street in the early morning you may be dazzled by a golden building, part of a new school emerging from the scaffolding in the London Borough of Lewisham. Tidemill School will be a remarkable combination of new educational facilities with a community centre and library, residential flats and commercial artists’ studios. The project has just won the World Architecture News award for the best international education project.

Tidemill typifies the approach of Pollard Thomas Edwards architects (PTEa), a genuinely different and highly innovative practice which combines design and construction consultancy with property development skills.

PTEa completed its first school project five years ago – acting both as architect and co-developer - and immediately won a national prize for Innovation of the Year. Their“big idea” was to develop residential apartments (or other income-generating uses) directly above new school buildings.

Director Andrew Beharrell explains:

‘Lots of schools raise money for new capital projects by selling off land, but this inevitably reduces their outdoor play and sports areas and leaves less space for further expansion and future generations. In other sectors it is commonplace to build homes above shops and offices and community centres. Our approach was ‘why not apply this to schools?’ We looked at each of the potential objections: noise, privacy, security, access, future maintenance. We found solutions to them all. PTEa has now delivered three complete new schools using this model, and they are all working well. The most ambitious of these raised over 80% of the costs of the school building, effectively by leasing the air-rights above.’

PTEa argues that the residential cross-subsidy model could offer particular advantages to independent schools. For one thing, they often occupy sites with restrictive planning designations, which limit potential development to previously built-on areas. Creating mixed-use buildings on the same footprint may get around this. Beharrell also points out that the idea could help with staff housing:

‘I know a number of teachers in the independent sector and understand how difficult it can be for them to buy or rent a home near to their place of work, especially in the South East and other high value locations. We would like to investigate applying key-worker and student housing models to house teachers and other staff in independent schools. This could involve a specialist provider funding and developing the homes, in return for a modest, but guaranteed, rental stream.

‘So far we have made the cross-subsidy idea work in urban locations, working with junior schools. However, there is no reason in principle why it should not work in suburban – and even rural - areas and for senior schools. Another thing we would especially like to do is to combine the idea with our expertise in housing for older people: what better synergy than to have active older people living above schools?’

The second innovation found in PTEa’s work with schools concerns shared use of facilities with the wider community. Each of PTEa’s designs is arranged to allow access to specific parts of the buildings and grounds by the local community when they are not required by the school: typically, this might include halls, IT suites, sports, arts, music and drama facilities. Careful design and management can maintain security at all times, while helping schools to raise income from under-used facilities – and maintain their charitable status by supporting the wider community and partner schools in the state sector.

Deptford Lounge and Tidemill Academy
Lewisham *2006-2011*

A golden vessel of co-located community uses

This mixed-use project which combines a primary academy, district library, community centre and artists' studios with affordable homes and a market square, provides a new civic heart for Deptford. Facilities are shared between the school and the community, to enhance the public realm of the Thameside town. These include a rooftop sports pitch, a flexible suite of assembly spaces and a dining hall and kitchen.

The development is centred on Tidemill Academy, a new district library called the Lounge, Resolution Studios, which provides homes and studios and exhibition space for local artists and converted warehouses which have been modified to house a Special Educational Needs unit. These buildings are linked by a glazed corridor which envelops three sides of a sheltered courtyard playground which pupils helped to design.

All shared facilities are in the Lounge and have been designed with separate access points from within the school and from the public realm. This enables the school to have sole use while children attend classes with the wider community using an entrance from a new square, to gain access out of hours. As well as reviving public life in the town centre, this project aimed to restore something of Deptford's past grandeur, which is best embodied in the Lounge's dramatic gold- coloured perforated copper screen.

It all began with a shoppers' car park. Lewisham Council had conceived a plan to build a new and expanded Tidemill Primary School on the public car park serving Deptford High Street. The catch was that the parking had to be re-provided, and the proposed solution was a basement below the school. The headteacher (with good reason) refused to go along with this, and the result was impasse. At this point, Mark Elms and David Booth (see page 122) learned of our work combining schools with housing, and we bonded at the consequent meeting. PTE worked out that we could satisfy the parking requirement by transforming a local street (with wide dog-toilet verges) into a 'parking boulevard'. This would be much safer, and cheaper to create and manage – and the existing car park could then be cleared for the new school.

Meanwhile the council's brief for the school expanded to include a public library (branded as the Deptford Lounge), a community centre, artists' studios (to replace an existing use) and a market square. Add in a block of flats (Deptford Studios) to generate cross-subsidy, and we had a heady cocktail of mixed uses.

Our role also expanded to plan a large new housing scheme to the south, partly on the site of the old Tidemill school, and later the creation of Market Yard and the restoration of the Listed historic carriage ramp and arches serving a rebuilt Deptford Station. Early on we engaged with passers-by shopping at the busy Deptford street-market, setting up in a portable trailer where we displayed a brightly coloured translucent model of our vision for Deptford town centre.

All these wonderful opportunities came from that schools' marketing campaign (see above). We owe a lot to Mark Elms and David Booth and the go-ahead senior team at Lewisham at that time. They knew how to get things done, how to find a way through the inevitably turgid legal processes, how to attract funding and manage risk. PTE also had a great team. Dominique Oliver took charge of the school and lounge project, working with Hamish Kilford-Brown, and David Graham, who also worked on the parking boulevard and carriage ramp. Tricia Patel led the later housing projects to the south at Giffin Street and Amersham Vale.

The council's brief expanded to include a heady cocktail of mixed uses

Deptford Lounge and Tidemill Academy viewed from new Market Square

Rushey Green Primary School
Catford *2006-2009*

An adaptable setting for indoor and outdoor learning

The same Lewisham client came to us to design a new school in a very different suburban context, and the project was again carried through by Domi and Hamish. With a much larger site than our three previous schools we were able to explore a purer expression of our ideas about the ideal learning environment, including ready access to outdoor space for every classroom and clear separation of the school hall for out-of-hours community use.

Most people only focus on the end-product of development, but with schools (as with estate regeneration) a lot of ingenuity is applied to how you get there, working around existing occupied premises. At St Jude's the school relocated from its tiny site to temporary buildings on a nearby park, but at St Thomas's, Rushey Green and Netley, we had to work around the school remaining in use throughout construction, and this profoundly influences the final layout. It is a disruptive process for staff and children, but it can also be a great learning experience, and we carried out design workshops with the children, which hopefully inspired some towards a future career in architecture or construction.

Another key aspect of school design is that the prevailing educational ethos and the basic demand for local school places can change so quickly. Three years after completion, we were asked to expand Rushey Green for an entire year group, and the clarity of the original concept enabled this to happen using modular classroom pods plugged into the existing circulation routes. We use a 'stage and scenery' approach to school design, fixing the expensive primary structure, fabric and services, but allowing for easy future adaptation of the internal layout. I worry that some of the lovely schools which win awards are so specific and complex that they will struggle to accommodate future change.

Postscript. In April 2025 Islington council announced the closure of St Jude and St Paul's Primary School because of falling demand for places due to demographic change. This is very upsetting for the current school community and also raises questions about the future of the building and how well it might adapt to an alternative use.

Netley Primary School
Euston *2008-2014*

Creating a campus for community and specialist learning, topped by homes to unlock HS2

Camden council approached us because of our expertise in colocation of schools with other uses and in residential property development. As with our previous schools work, we did not have to compete for the project because it was argued that we had unique skills.

This was another deliciously complex brief, working around an existing Victorian Board School – in this case retained and much-loved, unlike similar buildings which we had converted to housing (Northcroft Court, Barnsbury Place and Tidemill for example). We designed a substantial new range containing a large hall, foundation classrooms, community learning hub and special needs school for excluded pupils, topped with 70 flats to generate enough funds to pay for everything. The block allocated for private market flats ended up housing local residents decanted from their homes to make way for the ill- fated HS2 line to Euston. I worked with Cathy Buckley on the community engagement and planning application until Domi was available to take the lead.

My role on subsequent school projects, including Amberley School in Westminster and St Paul's Way in Poplar, became increasingly limited to early-stage strategies and design review, as Domi gradually built up our education team and portfolio. I hope that PTE maintains its work for schools– it complements our focus on residential neighbourhoods and can offer more opportunity for innovation and semi-public interiors than our housing work. However, it has become increasingly tough to compete and win new projects, and meanwhile state funding constraints tend to favour standard 'education sheds', making it ever harder to achieve joyful and contextual design. However, to lapse into sentimentality for a moment, the feedback from pupils on our completed schools make it all worthwhile:

'I really love the new building and all of my teachers.'

Near Misses

I have chosen around 55 completed projects for this memoir, and only five which did not go ahead. I have not tried to count the feasibility studies, masterplans, competitions and abortive commissions which did not lead anywhere, but I have probably been involved in as many as five hundred. Some of these were quick studies taking a day or two, but others went on for years, with some limited fees but seldom enough to cover our costs.

While working, I preferred not to dwell on the many projects for which we have competed and lost – you have to learn what you can from them and immediately move on to the next opportunity, filing away your abortive work for possible application to a future project. Perhaps a little retrospection is due here, but not too much and not too resentful of the cumulative years and millions of pounds I have wasted on competitive processes – some of them fair and transparent, others ranging from disappointing to outrageous. Clients - some of them cynical and others naïve, most trying to follow absurdly convoluted procurement practices - expect more and more speculative work from architects, and, with too many practices competing for too few jobs, our profession meekly complies. Claire Bennie's recent Architect Directory names 860 practices competing for housing projects in London.

I will just indulge in a few recollections of our more painful failures:

- A year-long 'competitive dialogue' process for a new civic centre and multiple housing sites in Brixton, which ended with our developer client 'entertaining' community representatives with a promotional film set to reggae music – until the audience begged them to stop.
- A similar process in Harrow for a civic centre and entire new residential quarter, where we felt ourselves in pole position until our housing association client suddenly decided to drop out and refused to compensate us for a year of investment.
- An interview for a school project in Chiswick at which the headteacher asked to hold on to our £3,000 competition model for further consideration, and then informed us that we were not chosen, and they had thrown away the model.
- A church and community centre in Barnet, for which we were told after interview that we were the preferred architect, but could we please reduce our fees by 50%.

I could go on and on – but must not!

One that got away – Brixton Town Hall competition entry in collaboration with Stanton Williams

New Arcadia

Some of the most exciting projects from my later career have been complete new rural settlements or 'urban villages' on the edge of existing towns. Here is how it started.

Castle Stuart
Tornagrain near Inverness *2004-2005*

Planning a model new town for an aristocratic landowner

'What were the names of the two gay assassins in Diamonds are Forever?' I had walked into an interview for potentially the largest project of my career to be faced with this question from the panel. Fortunately, I knew the answer (Mr Kidd and Mr Wint) and we won the job.

The project began and ended badly, but we had great fun in between. We assembled a multi-disciplinary design team, including engineers Alan Baxter and landscape architects Whitelaw Turkington, and I decreed that we would travel by train for the initial site visit and do some bonding enroute. They were sceptical. The rolling stock on the sleeper service to Inverness was ancient; First Class meant solo occupation of a standard threadbare cabin; dinner consisted of microwave haggis and miniatures of 'Famous Grouse' and breakfast a Highland shortbread biscuit and lukewarm tea. I slept badly and my back took two years to recover. The steward was drunk, apologised for the poor service and explained that he was also having to drive the train.

Working with PTE's Robin Saha-Choudhury (who was the associate for all the projects in this section and a very loyal help to me), Patricia Lozano Quintana and Hoi Yat Tsoi, over the next two years we developed a masterplan for an ideal new town of 10,000 people to be located near Inverness, on the coastal plain of the Moray Firth. We first set out the strategic planning argument for the new settlement and then drafted a set of Guiding Principles and an outline design for a walled town of over 4,000 homes centred on a town square and quarry gardens.

We planned three case study tours and travelled with the client to places in the UK, Denmark and Sweden, and then to Washington DC and Florida to look at New Urbanist settlements including Seaside (setting for the film 'The Truman Show') and Disney's new town Celebration. It was all fascinating, everyone learned a lot and I enjoyed spending time with John Stuart, the future Earl of Moray, his factor Andrew Howard and their ebullient and razor-sharp planning consultants Paul Roberts and Jonathan Coulson of Turnberry. They were delighted with our work. Everything was going swimmingly.

I failed to realise how wedded was the Moray Estate to creating a neo-traditional settlement – a Scottish Poundbury – and how impressed they were with the work of Floridian architect Andres Duany. Soon after our return from the US, they appointed Duany to replace to PTE.

It was a painful experience, but I don't regret it – it helped us to win subsequent work, especially Dunsfold Park, which began with the same PTE team. I admire good neo-traditional architecture, but I was sceptical about achieving it in an area of very low house prices and a vernacular based on stone and thick harling (rough-cast render), neither of which is readily affordable today. However, looking at the website of the completed phases, they do seem to have pulled it off, and I look forward to visiting someday.

Silsoe Campus
Bedfordshire *2006-2009*

Extending an historic village with community buy-in

Cranfield University was planning to vacate its 62-acre campus at Silsoe, and PTE's masterplan underpinned outline planning consent for an organic extension to the existing village, including: 380 new homes; a relocated and expanded school; indoor and outdoor sports facilities; offices and studios for small businesses; and 35 acres of open space for the enjoyment of all the villagers.

Our relationship with Turnberry survived the Castle Stuart debacle, and together we pulled off the remarkable achievement of outline planning for a huge expansion to this historic village granted by officers under delegated powers. So effective was the community engagement - based around the idea that new development would, directly through subsidy and indirectly through population growth, support new village facilities and revive ailing ones – that there were zero objections.

The land was sold to Blore Homes, who have built a neo-traditional housing estate very loosely based on our plan. It's pretty good.

The village lies next to the nationally important historic garden at Wrest Park, and our masterplan extended a grand axis from the park up to the new school. Wrest Park is open to the public through English Heritage – it deserves to be much better known and visited.

Dunsfold Park
Surrey *2005-today*

A new garden village injects new life into ‘the mausoleum of tranquility’

This 600-acre Second World War aerodrome will be transformed into a new Surrey village for the 21st century, with 1,800 homes set within a 350-acre country park and focused on a market square with shops and schools. The former runway becomes a landscape feature integrating the village with the expanded business park.

Our brief was to create the most sustainable settlement in the UK deep in the Surrey countryside. Dunsfold Park aims to build sustainability into the masterplan through the location of workspace, living space and local facilities, and centralised energy and waste infrastructure.

New homes will group around a market square which will include local shops and cafés, a primary school, sports centre, church and health centre. A semi-circular town canal will delineate a car-free zone at the centre of the village and connect to the Wey and Arun Canal, which runs to the south of the site.

PTE prepared the masterplan, successful outline planning application and detailed design code.

‘Mr Beharrell, is that the same Mr Simon Jenkins who writes for (pause) The Guardian newspaper?’ A low hiss emanated from the public gallery in Godalming council chamber – clearly not Guardian readers. I was being cross-examined by the opposition barrister at the month-long public enquiry to hear our appeal of Waverley Borough Council’s decision to refuse permission for our 2008 planning application. I had quoted in my evidence an article on resistance to rural development which includes (from memory) the ironic line: ‘Nothing must be allowed to disturb the mausoleum of tranquillity, which we have built using money which we have earned elsewhere’.

The enquiry contained many moments of high theatre:

- The witness for the Campaign for the Preservation of Rural England, who mixed up the ‘after’ and ‘before’ visualisations of our new village viewed from the Surrey Hills, so slight was the impact.
- A full day devoted to whether the Boeing 747 parked at Dunsfold could legally stay there, which hinged on the weight of the aircraft – it was allowed to land (with limited fuel) but not allowed to take off (laden with fuel).
- The inspector revealing a plane-spotter’s knowledge of Russian transport aircraft.
- The cross examination by our barrister Christopher Katkowski (KitKat) of local MP Jeremy Hunt, who admitted that he had not read any of the documents before expressing his condemnation of the plans. ‘Mr Hunt… Sir… and I mean this with the very greatest of respect… you are telling the inspector that you are in fact entirely ignorant (long pause) of the facts of this case?’

We lost, but lived to try again, and in the meantime (to its great credit) the council changed its position to support the new village, and so did the many local people who recognised that their lovely patch of rural Surrey needs new homes and jobs to retain and attract young people, including their offspring. More reluctant supporters conceded that if there must be new homes, better that they are sited on Dunsfold aerodrome than attached to existing towns and villages. Nevertheless, the campaign to stop the village continued to issue legal challenges for some years, funded by a few local retirees – the worried wealthy.

I have enjoyed working with our Dunsfold client – Jim McAllister, his son Jamie, Gerry Forristal and the rest of the Rutland team - for nearly 20 years now, to realise our shared vision for a new sustainable village. When they first selected us, Jim looked at me intently and said that this was more than a project, it was a vocation. He has shown great determination and has long been fascinated by how new technologies can combat climate change. Perhaps some consolation for the long delays in realising the project is that the best strategies keep evolving. In April I went to his 80th birthday party. This year we have completed the new access road, and hopefully next year will see the first houses built at Dunsfold Park…

Very sadly Jim will not be around to see his legacy delivered – he died in July 2024 just as I was concluding this piece. I have worked with some great clients, and he was the best.

Our brief was to create the most sustainable settlement in the UK deep in the Surrey countryside

Marleigh (previously Wing)
Cambridge *2012-today*

Showing how managed release of Green Belt can relieve the housing crisis

This 180-acre site next to Cambridge Airport is emerging as a new urban village and eastern expansion to the city, providing 1,300 homes, primary school, local shops and a country park – plus a new business park focused on motor showrooms. PTE's masterplan achieved outline planning permission, and we then produced a Design Principles Guide for developer selection and a Design Code planning document. We delivered the first phase of 547 homes and the village centre with the development partner Hill.

Marshalls occupies a streamlined Art Deco headquarters overlooking Cambridge airport. At our first meeting I glanced out of the window to watch a mysteriously windowless plane landing. A long ramp was attached, and a string of racehorses trooped out enroute to Newmarket. It's a fascinating family business, founded in 1909 by a former steward of the University's Pitt Club, who realised that students would appreciate a taxi service to get them home from the club after a hard evening's drinking. The business expanded into car repairs, then sales, then aviation, establishing the aerodrome and flying school in 1929 and later specialising in servicing and modifying military aircraft. I enjoyed working with Robert Marshall, and his late father Sir Michael, on the Wing masterplan.

If Dunsfold is evolving slowly, then Wing has moved at great speed, helped by the land having already been removed from the Green Belt and allocated for potential development. We started with an intensive three- day design 'charette', which attracted over 1000 visitors, and the successful outline planning application was submitted in around 12 months.

Unusually, Marshall had selected a public artist even before the masterplanner, and I soon befriended Matt Lane-Sanderson, a Cambridge-born sculptor and metalworker, who has defected to the Welsh borders. One of Matt's larger creations for Marshall became the centrepiece of an exhibition at Diespeker Wharf – a huge, repurposed Tristar engine, which he towed from Cambridge behind a Land Rover.

PTE China

In March 2006 I found myself lecturing a packed hall of Chinese Communist Party officials on the virtues of community engagement in the planning process. In the car park outside the shining marble foyer of the Jiaxing Urban Planning and Construction Bureau, a disheveled group of farmers protested about the forcible clearance of their land to make way for new residential tower blocks.

PTE has hardly ever worked outside the UK, and we have never built abroad. And so, a business development trip to China was a major adventure for us. Thanks to an enlightened visa scheme (subsequently cancelled) to allow overseas students to join UK practices, we had several very energetic Chinese staff, including Albert Chan and Ling Jiang. They badgered us into doing a trip and organised the whole thing - impeccably. Some of our key competitors were working in China, and so why not take a look? I grandly described it to my neighbour as a 'fact finding mission', and he expressed surprise that there were 'any more facts to find'.

And so, Steve Chance and I, with Albert and Ling, found ourselves on a ten-day tour of five cities: Shanghai, Hangzhou, Jiaxing, Lianyungang and Wuhan (later to find fame as the source of the global pandemic). We gave two lectures a day, to civic officials and university students, and ate lavish banquets at lunch and dinner, hosted by Chinese planning institutes and architectural practices. The Chinese government was encouraging its people to collaborate with Western businesses and learn from us. A typical evening banquet worked up to an endless round of rice wine toasts to future amity, followed by the tabling of a contract. Albert acted as my human shield, intercepting the toasts and slipping out of the room every few minutes to spit the powerful spirit into a plant pot.

We had recently published our book Out of the Ordinary, and we told our audiences about projects including Diespeker, Crystal Wharf and City Road Basin; Arundel Square and Ironworks; Lefevre Walk and Grahame Park; Castle Stuart and Dunsfold Park.

We emphasised contextual regeneration, community engagement and environmental sustainability - the opposite of the huge and repetitive urban extensions which we mostly saw on our tour. Our audiences seemed to be very receptive.

We received many offers of collaboration and some real masterplan commissions, especially in Wuhan. We seriously considered setting up a Chinese office, but we quickly learned that the legal and commercial hurdles were significant. It would be very difficult to make a profit in the relatively low status housing sector, and especially in second-tier cities. It would require a big investment of time and money, and lots of personal attention from the directors, including frequent trips and long stays. It was not for us. Subsequently I think that all our competitors have withdrawn from China.

Nevertheless, it was a great trip, and an eye-opener. Our Chinese hosts were generous, welcoming and commercially canny. They seemed genuinely interested, hungry even, for different approaches to planning and design.

Public Private

The move towards the privatisation of public services, which began with the Thatcher government and continued up to the 2024 election of a Labour government (what next?), has had a profound effect on the way that public land is developed. Despite the many celebrated failures of privatisation (especially among the utility companies and on the railways) the policy has been broadly successful in delivering housing in London. However, I should distinguish the concept of private and public entities sharing skills and assets, risks and rewards, from the parallel withdrawal of central grant funding, and consequent reliance on cross-subsidy from housing for sale to fund affordable housing and wider regeneration. This has had a pernicious effect on the physical form and social balance of new developments. I have written about this at length in Superdensity and Altered Estates and their sequels.

I have also written above about estate regeneration schemes carried out by public private partnerships, notable the Peckham Partnership. In this section I will discuss three large public private partnerships on other types of local authority land – all three with Grainger plc, at the time Britain's largest professional residential landlord, with lots of experience in managing property but less in developing urban housing. The fourth project in this section, Thames View East, was an unusual model for estate regeneration, which I hoped would become commonplace – it has not.

Hornsey Road
Islington *2002-2009*

Doing the diving lady proud

The transformation of derelict public baths into a sequence of new public squares and streets has created 200 new apartments, offices for Islington Council and a children's centre. The listed gatehouse building was restored, with its famous diving lady neon sign, and the boiler-house chimney became the centrepiece of a glazed foyer.

This project introduced me to a favourite client and to a future star of PTE. I was approached by James Fielder, development director at Grainger, who had recently moved there from the commercial sector. We immediately bonded over a shared love of motorcycles. It was refreshing to deal with a client from a non-housing background, and a client organisation with very different roots and skills in housing - and I admit that I rather liked visiting their swanky offices in Knightsbridge and attending their frequent parties. So did the project architect I hired for this job – Kaye Bogues (who later became Kaye Stout after a PTE romance and marriage). Kaye had been working in Ireland and was looking to make a new life in London. I knew instantly that she was the right person, although I recall it took some negotiation to entice her to PTE.

The Hornsey Road Baths and Barnsbury sites were the subject of twin competitions held by Islington to find a private sector partner to lead the development process and return to the council a land value and property assets – a council office building and children's Sure Start Centre at Hornsey and affordable housing on both sites (35% I think). They were both large sites containing characterful existing buildings (some Listed) and had complex boundaries with neighbouring properties and streets. Essentially both are large infill projects and exemplars of PTE's approach to visible urban mending, repurposing of existing structures (now dubbed Retrofit), integration of old and new, and mixing of private and affordable housing.

Stylistically, like other PTE projects of the period, they are also early examples of what became known as the New London Vernacular, although they were finished long before the Mayor's London Housing Design Guide promoted that phrase and approach.

Grainger and its project managers tightly controlled the delivery process, while also transferring all risk on to the contractor through a design and build contract. PTE did a detailed post-planning tender package and were then novated to the contractor Ardmore to do the working drawings, but also retained by Grainger in a site inspection role – we even had to certify the work. It was a tough contract, but cordial relationships were maintained through regular lunches among all parties.

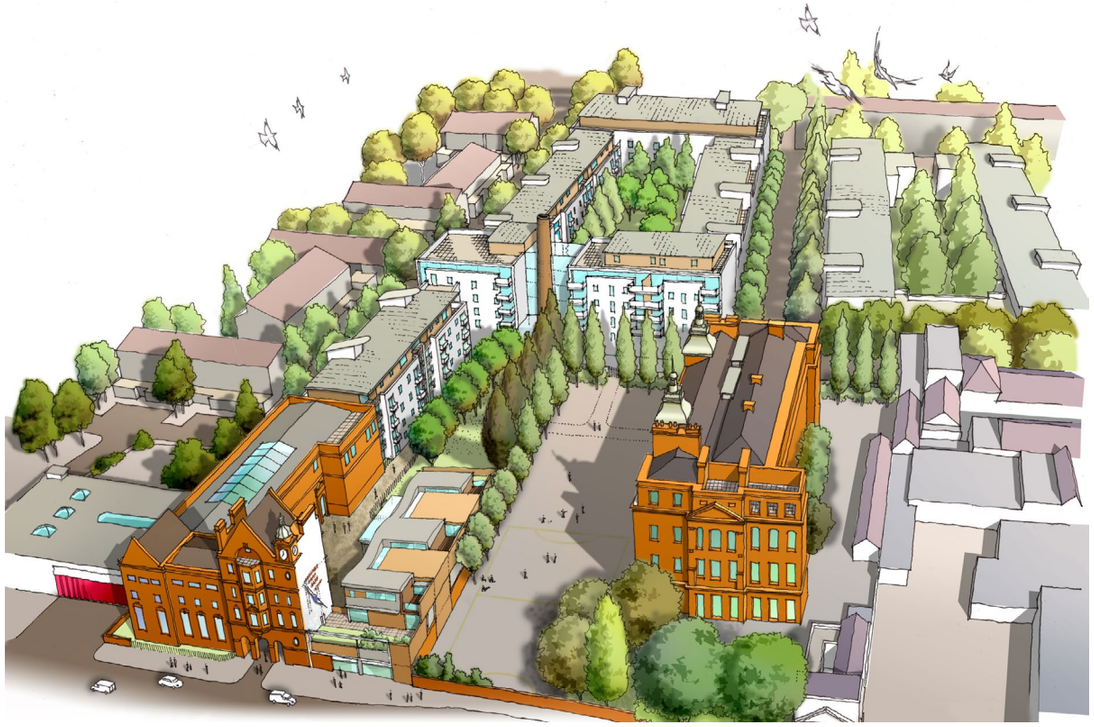
I want to mention three other important PTE alumni who worked on Hornsey Road.

Mike O'Rourke ran the refurbishment and conversion of the Listed gatehouse (with its famous neon sign), and the shell of the neighbouring laundry building, which was converted by others into a community theatre. A member of the PTE family for some 30 years, Mike appeared to be forever young, but died in his sixties from lung disease, possibly caused by an earlier job surveying asbestos-riddled buildings.

David Graham provided much of the detailed design for this and several other projects in this story, including the school projects. David was another PTE 'grey beard' with an impish sense of humour and irrepressible enthusiasm. He once performed a puppet show to train the practice in health and safety legislation.

Hoi Yat Tsoi (Yat) came to us as a young graduate from Hong Kong via the University of East London, and he stayed for nearly 20 years. He was an inventive designer, and he drew beautifully by hand and using the latest digital technology. He worked on the children's centre at Hornsey and many other projects in this story.

Writing about Hornsey Road Baths - which originally combined public swimming baths with facilities for washing your body and your clothes when many people lacked such at home – reminds me of a very recent exchange at an NLA debate. I mentioned that I had first met my wife Diana at the college laundrette, as an example of the social potential of shared facilities, and one of the other speakers proposed that private ownership of white goods should be banned, to save the planet and encourage us to share – radical stuff!



Barnsbury Place
Islington *2002-2010*

Loft living in former beacons of learning

A new urban quarter within the Barnsbury Conservation Area seamlessly combines old and new buildings, containing a wide range of luxury and affordable homes. PTE's design converts three Victorian heritage buildings into duplex flats and inserts new apartment blocks and family houses to create an intricate network of small streets and squares.

I was on holiday in France in the summer of 2007 when I learned that Grainger had decided to sell the Barnsbury site, on which we had laboured long and hard to achieve planning permission. It was the first sign that London's long run of continuous growth and economic buoyancy might be faltering, and it worried me. The Northern Rock crisis followed that autumn and Leaman Brothers a year later.

(By the way, I had no internet or smart phone in those days. I did have a basic mobile phone, and would annoy colleagues by phoning in regularly when on holiday – a slippery slope towards the constant availability which blights professional lives today.)

The site was bought by Mount Anvil, who bravely proceeded to build it out, but used other architects for the working drawings. The result was an architectural and commercial success. Quite a few of our projects have been built out by other architects. We always get upset at losing control and losing the work, but often the end-results have been excellent - and we are spared the pain of the protracted and often loss-making delivery process.

The Barnsbury site contained three very handsome multi-storey former school buildings. One of them was occupied by Islington's Building Inspectorate and contained tottering towers of dusty files. I remember visiting a Building Inspector when I had just joined PTE – they were god-like authority figures then – and waiting to speak, while he opened a drawer in his metal desk and produced a thermos, a set of Staffordshire crockery and a single ginger biscuit. I was offered neither tea nor biscuit but did receive sage advice on manhole interceptors.

As at Northcroft school, we were able (just) to insert mezzanine galleries into the former classrooms, to create wonderful and quirky double-height flats. We also designed some large new family houses, and I remember the estate agents shaking their heads and saying nobody would buy a new house in Barnsbury – really?

Seven Sisters Regeneration
Tottenham *2004-2020*

A sorry saga of local politics

This development would have transformed the complete urban block immediately above Seven Sisters underground station: a major transport hub with a footfall of ten million passers-by every year. 196 apartments were to overlook a roof garden above shops and restaurants, overlooking a new public square and gateway to Tottenham.

I have lost more design competitions than I care to remember, but sometimes winning is even worse.

James Fielder and I decided to go for this Haringey council-sponsored competition. We won it in 2005, and the project was aborted fifteen years later, just when I thought we were finally going to build it out. The long and sorry saga of Wards Corner (later rebranded as Seven Sisters Regeneration) has been well-told by journalist Dave Hill on his On London website. I will just recall a few highlights and lowlights.

We were two years into the project before the council would allow us to publicise our proposals and start the local engagement process. The principle of demolition and redevelopment had been set by the planning brief, which had already been consulted on. It was a shock to find out that a vocal sector of the community was strongly opposed to the whole idea – they wanted to restore the long-derelict Wards Corner department store and a much-altered terrace of Edwardian shops. Our first tense public meeting (one of many) was enlivened by the cross-dressing community chairperson, who referred to me as 'young Michael Palin'.

The planning process was a war of attrition. We had walked into a poisonous local political row, which became supercharged when the objectors latched on to the 'expulsion' of the Columbian market as their 'casus belli'. (The market had been given temporary permission to occupy part of the building pending redevelopment and was offered new and much better premises in the new proposals). At one planning meeting police escorted the committee chair from the chamber for her safety. At another, a committee member was so intimidated by objectors in the gallery that she voted against her own party-line, either in confusion or fear.

The process dragged on for years, with several resubmissions and every stage challenged at judicial review and even at the European Court of Human Rights, while the scheme was assailed by the press and exploited by regional and national politicians. Even when an unassailable planning permission was achieved, there was a parallel process of compulsory site purchase to complete, with small property owners holding out for more compensation, only finally settled by public enquiry.

Architecturally, the scheme was very modest by today's standards – mid-rise mansion flats above new shops, mostly six storeys, in polite and bricky New London Vernacular style. It is a little galling that the council's adjoining site at Apex House rapidly achieved consent for an assertive 20-storey tower, which was built out while we continued to struggle.

I don't at all blame Grainger for pulling out when the finishing line seemed to be in sight. One factor which helped to kill the project was that it had taken so long that the designs, for which we had gained planning, required further adjustment to meet updated technical standards before they could be built. Arguably that could mean going back to planning and provoking another attempt to quash the scheme. Some things are not meant to be.

I genuinely hope that an alternative retrofit 'community scheme' comes to fruition, but it has been unclear all along how it could be funded.

Thames View East
Barking *2011-2014*

How to build new council homes without using public funds

This project demonstrates that social housing is a valuable asset, not a costly problem. In a volatile world, overseas investors (in this case from Hong Kong) saw British council homes as a safe place to invest money for a modest 30-year return. The council provides the land, owns, allocates and manages the completed homes and guarantees the rental income to service the debt. Private investment funds all the design, planning and construction.

The project was showered with awards, both for its design and its innovative funding, and I thought this could become a mainstream solution to building affordable homes. With James Aumonier, from the investment manager Long Harbour, I presented it to housing conferences and several other councils. There was no take up. I think the resistance was partly procedural, partly political and partly instinctive suspicion of foreign money. Also, around this time, it became easier for councils to borrow and develop for themselves: some have done so with great success, but others have over-reached and failed.

The financial model imposed immovable financial and programme targets, and this really forced us to simplify the design, standardise the range of homes and details, and make every pound count. Our client was Laing O'Rourke, and the design had to conform to their factory-built modular concrete panel system. One of their chairman's edicts was that there must be no scaffolding on their sites. In the event, it was cheaper for them to subcontract the construction to Islington-based family firm Jerram Falkus – the start of a strong and on-going relationship for PTE. William Jerram wryly observed that the nearby A13 was known as 'scaffolder's alley' and there was no cheaper place in London to rent the stuff. They built it using traditional masonry construction. Such is the continuing challenge of factory systems to penetrate the UK housing market.

So, for no capital outlay, Barking and Dagenham ended up with 276 new award-winning council homes, replacing an unpopular high-rise estate with traditional streets, terraced houses and low-rise flats.

This was another strong PTE team led by Tricia Patel and David Graham.

Investors need to see social housing as a valuable asset, not a costly problem

Popular Design

From BD Debate Piece December 2012

There are many reasons why people are instinctively resistant to development, especially in the crowded Southeast: pressure on social and physical infrastructure; tribal fear of incomers; and the impulse (even if subconscious) to protect the value of existing property by restricting supply. However, bad design clearly plays a part and, much as we may like to blame housebuilders and contractors, bad design starts with designers.

Bad design fails to connect with the people who use it and their neighbours who walk past it every day. Narrowing the debate to residential development, a simplistic history of urban design in Britain goes like this: from the 18th Century until WW2 Britain produced a series of quietly profound innovations in urban design and domestic architecture, which perfectly meet the Vitruvian criteria of 'commodity, firmness and delight': the Georgian square and townhouse, the Victorian and Edwardian inner suburbs, the mansion flat and semi-detached Metroland. The twin demons of the Luftwaffe and International Modernism destroyed this living tradition and heralded an era of top-down municipal housing provision and volume housebuilding, neither of which paid sufficient attention to what its customers really wanted.

Against this background it is hardly surprising that the public 'turned against development': more recently, localism and the internet have given people the opportunity and the voice to protest Many architects have been striving to reconnect with their customers and neighbours ever since the tower blocks began to fall in the late 70s – it takes a long time to rebuild trust.

They sometimes do this better in the New World. I have recently made a couple of visits to Cambridge, Massachusetts, where the domestic architecture, new and old, manages to be diverse, harmonious and timeless – and all without aesthetic planning controls. They seem to enjoy a 'living vernacular', which evolves to meet contemporary needs and advances in materials. Nearly everyone is happy to fit in, and very few feel they have to make a statement by being different.

The current exhibition on the New Housing Vernacular at London's NLA is encouraging. Several people have remarked that 'all the projects look the same' – faced in brick with vertical window proportions and a conscious look of solidity - and I take this to be a thoroughly good sign that the age of the icon has been succeeded by well-mannered respect for context. Could we be entering an age of humility?

New terraced cottages at Woodside Square, Muswell Hill

New London Vernacular

The phrase New London Vernacular was popularized by the interim London Housing Design Guide published under mayor Boris Johnson in 2010 – one of the better things he did. Later iterations of the guide, and adoption of many of its recommendations under successive London Plans, have profoundly shaped housing design in the capital, improving standards, but also imposing a blanket of uniformity.

Although the guide insists that 'a new vernacular does not propose a singular architectural style', in reality it is strongly associated with a revival of a solid-looking brick architecture set on traditional streets and squares and loosely based on Georgian proportions, including a pattern of vertically shaped windows. PTE had been doing something similar for three decades.

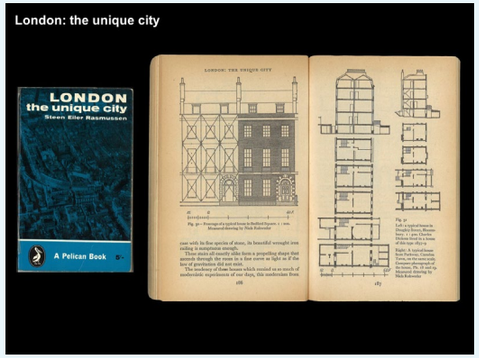
In December 2012 I gave a PechaKucha style talk on the New London Vernacular at the New London Architecture (NLA) centre in Store Street, to accompany an exhibition of the same name.

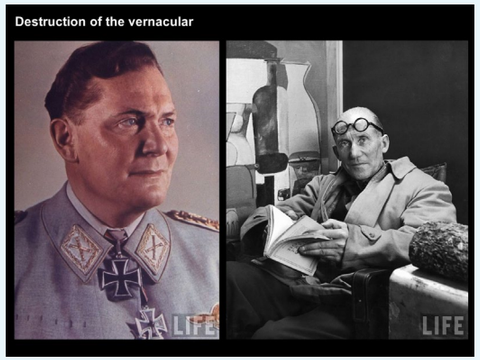
Vernacular is not a style
Vernacular is a common tongue, a popular dialect, distinctive of a particular region and culture. In London we no longer have a living vernacular. What we call 'vernacular' is often just a style made up of references to tradition and squeamishly dismissed by architects as 'pastiche'.

The new humility?
Vernacular architecture is also modest, and its creators are content to be anonymous. If that sounds dull, it isn't. Look at this exhibition. Several people have remarked that 'all the projects look the same' and I take this to be a thoroughly good sign that the age of the icon has been succeeded by well-mannered respect for context. Could we be entering an age of humility?

What is London's historic vernacular?
From the 18th Century until WW2 Britain produced a series of quietly profound innovations in urban design and domestic architecture, which perfectly meet the Vitruvian criteria of 'commodity; firmness and delight'.

London: the unique city
The distinctive qualities of London were documented and celebrated by this book, first published in 1934. Rasmussen contrasts the domestic and social impulses behind London's planning and architecture with the more authoritarian tendencies of our European neighbours.





Destruction of the vernacular
Talking of which, a simplistic history of the destruction of London's town planning tradition would blame these two: the first for blasting holes in our precious urban fabric and the second for inspiring a generation of architects to favour experimentation and wholesale replacement over mending.

Visible Mending in the 1980s and 90s
Since the first tower blocks began to fall in the late 70s many architects have been trying to create places and homes which reconnect with London's disrupted tradition of urban design and domestic architecture. Here are just a few early examples by Pollard Thomas Edwards. You will notice that they are all made of brick –actually, the same brick, the legendary Smead Dean London stock.

Back to the Future: Four Recent Projects
I am now going to show you four current and recent projects which continue that effort to rediscover and perpetuate a London vernacular. It is more challenging today, given the much higher densities at which we are required to build, and construction techniques which sometimes favour lightweight cladding over brick.

Arundel Square – completing a Victorian square
This project provides the missing fourth side of an incomplete London square in Barnsbury. A row of six contemporary mansion blocks replicate the scale of the grand Victorian houses, which have been converted into flats over the years.

The big idea which enables this to happen was to deck over the North London line, which ran in a cutting through the square. As well as transforming a narrow embankment into a valuable development site this enlarged the central public gardens and paid for them to be re-landscaped.

It is difficult to reconcile modern apartment plans and ceiling heights with the facade proportions of London's traditional street architecture, especially if we are also incorporating balconies. So at Arundel Square we created a layered facade with these prominent floating planes providing a strong vertical proportion and subdivision. Portland stone was preferred (to brick) to achieve the desired level of precision.

Angel Waterside – contemporary mansion flats
Angel Waterside also creates a new public garden, this time fronting on to City Road Basin.

The mansion block typology breaks this large building into four cores, each with a front door on the street, and integrate a wide variety of homes – ranging from two-million-pound penthouses to affordable rented family flats. You cannot detect the different tenures from the outside.

A small number of flats are clustered around each core. There are no long corridors, and the larger flats are dual aspect.

The facade treatment on the garden side demanded a very precise cladding material, and this time we chose weathered zinc cassettes. The diving-board balconies look spectacular but are not for the faint hearted. On the entrance side we used render to lighten up a rather gloomy street.

Connaught Gardens – reinventing the townhouse
This is a development of seven houses for sale on a hilly site in North London, completed three years ago. The mid-terrace plots are only 4 metres wide between party walls, and yet they contain spacious houses of around 1,500sqft. We could not do the same today. Lifetime homes regulation would increase the widths by around a metre and add about £250,000 to the price- more than our target customers could afford.

The secret is in the section. The houses appear to be only two storeys high from the street, but actually have five levels, including a secret roof garden. There is a family room and kitchen at the lower garden level, a reception room at entry level with great views of Alexandra Palace.

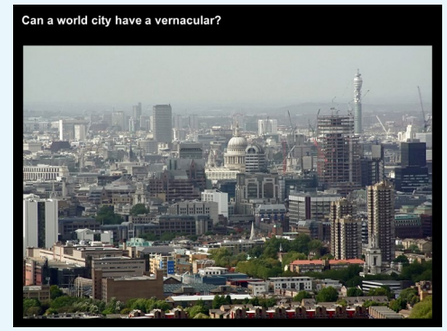
The opposite neighbours are black and white Tudorbethan family houses from the 1930s-so, we used black bricks, white render and slate roofs on this side. However, the gardens have the character of woodland, dominated by very large-lime trees, On this side we used cedar shingles- not a typical London material, but it supports the 'rus in urbs' self-image of us Muswell Hillbillies.

Gladstone Park – transforming the semi
This project is set deep into Metroland and is a celebration of the semi. There are about 20 houses facing on to a public park next to a suburban railway line and a Victorian pumping station – Betjeman country

Actually they are not pure semis, being linked at ground level. In this age of the garden centre and the barbecue, we decided that rear garden access is not so important as it used to be, when people dug for victory and kept chickens. So, we expanded the ground floor to provide more spacious living, with interconnecting sitting, dining and kitchen areas which can be closed off or open plan.

This project is firmly about brick. As at Connaught Gardens, black stained pergolas integrate and hide all the stuff required at the front: refuse and recycling bins, car parking, utility meters and bicycle storage.

Can a world city have a vernacular?
London is a world city attracting millions of visitors and settlers. We are proud of its incredible cultural diversity and rapid pace. The thought I will close on is this: can and should London today aspire to a vernacular domestic architecture, or is it right and proper that we also increasingly look like a world city – like Singapore? I expect you can guess my answer.



PTE Rescue

As programmes have become more protracted and the search for financially viable solutions more challenging, it has become increasingly common for clients to switch architects in mid-project and for sites to change hands, with a new owner bringing in a new team. (This is a separate issue from Design and Build contractors preferring to exchange the planning architect for their own delivery architect, for reasons of cost and control).

There have been many occasions on which we have been appointed to 'rescue' projects, which have run into difficulty. Here are two examples, which happen to be located close to one another in different boroughs (Brent and Barnet) on each side of the Edgware Road in Colindale.

Airco Close

Colindale *2003-2006*

How to build more and better homes without upsetting the neighbours

This project demonstrates how London's need for more homes can be achieved whilst providing proper family houses with gardens, and low-rise flats arranged in small intimate clusters.

Airco Close was formerly a commercial car storage park in the shadow of the service side of the multi-storey Oriental City shopping complex. Our scheme has transformed this unpromising site into an elegant and welcoming group of 36 family houses and 115 low-rise flats. The town houses are the latest refinement of a design developed by Pollard Thomas Edwards over the past twenty years. The materials and proportions echo the 'streamlined moderne' of the inter-war suburbs which form the backdrop to the development.

I have reproduced this project description in full because it addresses one of today's live issues – the 'densification' of the suburbs, which I have also covered above under *Transforming Suburbia* and will come back to when I describe a recent Croydon project. At only three and four storeys, Airco Close achieves over 100 homes per hectare, compared to its interwar context at around 30 homes per hectare. The previous architects had got into trouble because of discrepancies in the planning permission drawings which exposed their scheme to challenge. Encouraged by our client Alison Mackenzie of Network Housing Association we took the opportunity to review the 'diagram' and found that we could achieve the same number and size of homes within a much tighter envelope, taking a full storey off the height – popular with neighbours and cheaper to build.

The name and the white rendered 'streamlined moderne' paid homage to the Aircraft Manufacturing Company (Airco), which operated from here from 1912 to 1920, producing thousands of military aircraft and, after the Great War, running the UK's first airline. Their chief designer was the legendary Geoffrey de Havilland. Project architect David Graham kindly gave me a framed photograph of an Airco single-seat biplane, which sits above my desk.

Sadly, the white render quickly became dirty, and once again we overestimated the capacity of the housing association to carry out the required cyclical maintenance.

Zenith House
Colindale *2010-2014*

How to combine tall towers with mansion flats and street houses

Just five years later and across the main road we were looking at a much greater increase in height and density – to over 280 homes per hectare – in line with the London Plan's emphasis on growth areas near 'transport nodes' in Outer London. That figure is now a starting point, and some high-rise schemes are achieving four times the density.

Occupying a prominent corner site on the Edgware Road, this scheme combines mews houses, mansion flats and a 16-storey tower to create over 300 mixed tenure homes around a new garden square and street network. Winter gardens provide tranquil spaces on the busy road frontage.

At the time, I think that the Zenith tower was PTE's tallest building to date. Whether by inclination or chance the practice has continued to limit its work to around 20 storeys, which the NLA's annual London Tall Buildings survey regards as the minimum for a 'tall building'. (My preferred threshold is ten storeys or 30m, which is still the height at which London boroughs must refer planning applications to the GLA).

The design which we replaced was a complex 'megastructure', which piled flats on top of a vast wedding venue and multi-storey car park. We found we could achieve better value with a connected streetscape and simple range of housing typologies including courtyard houses, which line the boundaries and match the scale of their interwar neighbours.

Dominique Oliver and Hamish Kilford-Brown were the project leaders, with the formidable Laura Marr on delivery.

Are we being dense?

Following Richard Rogers's 1999 Urban Task Force report, London's housing industry has shifted direction from mixing houses with mid-rise flats towards almost entirely (90% according to the NLA) flatted development at densities and heights which were inconceivable 25 years ago.

I have written a lot about this, and about the use (and misuse) of density as a tool to assess and guide development, as a co-author of *Recommendations for living at Superdensity* (2007), *Superdensity: the Sequel* (2015), and recently *What is the Future of High-Rise Housing* (2023). I also made various conference and seminar presentations, including a series of talks entitled *Are we being dense?* I prefaced one, to a bemused audience at the annual housing conference in Brighton, by showing the opening title sequence from TV series the Sopranos, which follows Tony Soprano's homeward car commute from Manhattan to the New Jersey suburbs.

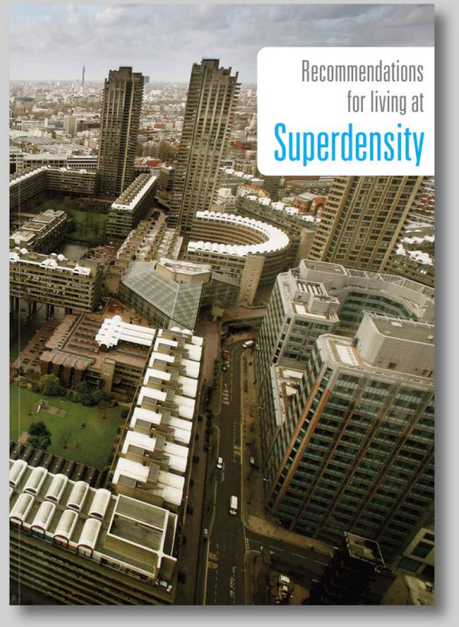
For *Superdensity: the Sequel* I drafted a timeline (overleaf) showing the growing intensity of London's common housing typologies since the 1800s and a short explanation of the issues around the measurement and definition of density. Here is an extract from a related talk I did in 2015:

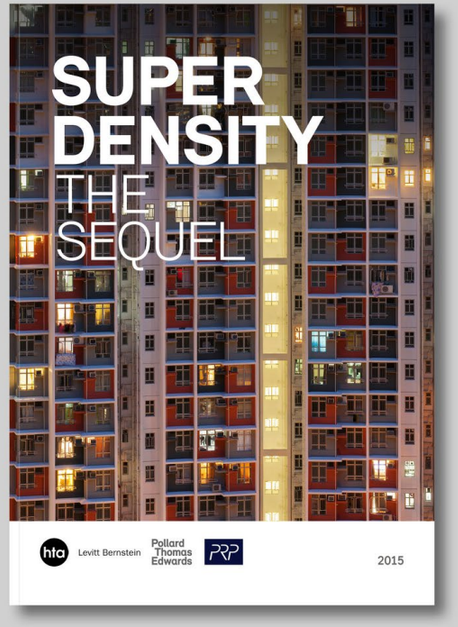
As practitioners Pollard Thomas Edwards deals with around 20 major planning applications a year, all of which illustrate some aspect of the application of density to the assessment of development.

We find the existing London Plan density matrix to be a useful guide towards wider spatial planning and a starting point for considering the appropriate intensity of development at a particular location. However, we often encounter confusion, on the part of applicants and third-party objectors, around the use of the GLA's density matrix. Despite clear disclaimers in the London Plan, there is a tendency to interpret the matrix values as simple targets.

Objectors have difficulty in understanding why density 'limits' are so often exceeded by developers and why local authorities appear so ready to allow 'over-development'.

The 2021 London Plan dumped the density matrix, seemingly for the contradictory reasons that it was holding back development and that everyone was ignoring it anyway. Given our discretionary planning system, in which everything is negotiable, removing density caps (however, loosely fitting) has encouraged the idea that more is better – 'optimisation' has become 'maximisation'. Although there is a raft of detailed policies and compliances which should provide a sensible brake on height and density, these are frequently compromised in favour of hitting housing targets. One important outcome is explored in my work on high-rise housing and open space in *What is the Future of High-Rise Housing*.





In 2015, I attended a Mayor's Design Advisory Group session and gave the following response to the question 'Leaving aside historic character and context, are there pragmatic limits to density for housing to offer a decent quality of life for residents?'

'Superdensity the Sequel' begins by charting the dramatic and accelerating pace of change in London and then looks at the implications under three headings – each of which is relevant in answering this question.

- *Placemaking – and specifically street life – we see public streets as the focus of community life.*
- *Creating mixed communities – we see the accommodation of all sorts of different people as one of the very special things about London and the bedrock of its stability and success.*
- *Managing superdense development – and the costs to the occupier – we think there is too much focus on capital cost and not enough on cost in use.*

This chart illustrates the increase in London's development densities by reference to a selection of common typologies – including the terraced house, the mansion flat and the semi. Inter-war Metroland is at the low end at about 20 dwellings per hectare (dph).

From its early history up to around 1995 residential development in London very rarely exceeded 150 dph – and the old GLC operated a density cap at this level.

Each of these familiar street-based typologies has proved to be highly adaptable to a very wide range of Londoners – in terms of income, age, household size and ethnicity – they absorb diversity and they encourage social and community life.

In the last 15 years development densities have rocketed. In 2007 we used Superdensity to describe schemes over 150 dph. In Superdensity the Sequel we use 350 dph as the top end of Superdensity – this is also around the top of the GLA matrix.

We know – not from theory but from extensive practice – and we illustrate through 12 case studies – that we can create successful places at Superdensities between 150 and 350 dph. Applying the three sets of tests, these places can:

- *Promote street life*
- *Integrate all sorts of different types of homes for different types of household*
- *Offer a range of service charges to suit different pockets – and a range of optional facilities.*

At these densities we can also integrate social infrastructure, such as parks, schools, shops and places for recreation.

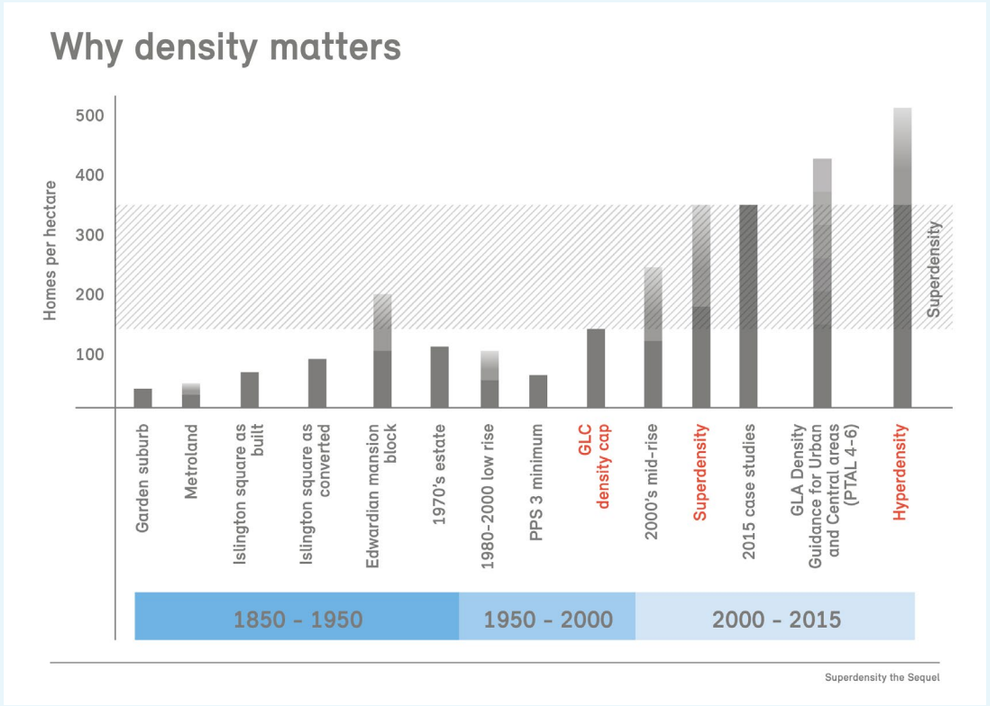
Our case studies all promote medium-rise apartment blocks as the norm, but they also show how taller buildings and family houses can form part of the mix.

We call anything above 350 dph Hyperdensity – and to achieve these densities tall buildings start to predominate - Nine Elms and Wood Wharf are examples. They do have their place – foreign investment is essential for London, and for those who can afford it, they are great places to live. BUT we have serious concerns about Hyperdensity becoming widespread. We don't think it has much to contribute to solving the housing needs of 'ordinary Londoners' – not least because it inhibits social and community life - and fails to accommodate a diverse society.

Applying our three sets of tests, tall towers:

- *Undermine street life – both because of their impacts on the microclimate and because the further you are from the ground the more effort is involved in going out. I don't buy the idea of the vertical village.*
- *They attract homogeneous households rather than diverse ones – in particular, they are unsuitable for families – unless you can also afford a cottage in Wiltshire.*
- *And they cost more to build and more to service – and the passing on of these costs to occupiers make them unsuitable for people on low or medium incomes.*

All of this begs the question 'who is London for?' I am going to assume – but some of you may want to challenge this – that London is not exclusively for high-earning childless people and international visitors. If you accept that premise, then it follows that we need a diverse housing stock to accommodate a wider range of households.



Houses versus Flats

In March 2024 I was asked to speak in favour of houses at an NLA debate in response to the motion: 'What do Londoners need – houses or flats?' Like most debates it forces people to adopt polarised positions and is therefore very simplistic. (My co-speaker Jo McCafferty refused to engage with the motion, and explained very sensibly why we, of course, need both houses and flats). However, it was fun to do, and the conclusion probably represents my current thinking about London's housing development. It follows neatly on from 'Are We Being Dense' and so I am inserting it here.

What's wrong with flats?

'Opinion is deeply divided as to whether there is a future for flat dwelling in England…the sin of building to too high a density has frequently been committed... flats… are a poor investment…'

That was Herman Muthesius, the German envoy sent to study English domestic architecture in 1904. His monumental work devoted just three rather sceptical pages to flats.

Soon after, in The Age of Innocence, American novelist Edith Wharton satirised social attitudes towards so-called 'French Flats': 'That was how women with lovers lived in wicked old societies, in apartments with all the rooms on one floor, and all the indecent propinquities.'

These days Londoners quite like a bit of 'indecent propinquity', but we still regard a flat as a poor substitute for a house.

In researching our book What is the Future of High-Rise Housing? *- published one year ago - the LSE did a survey of 50 leaseholders living in recently built London flats. The main focus was on service charges and block management. Most were unhappy with the cost and level of service.*

Two thirds experienced serious maintenance issues. 78% said they hoped to be living in a house in five years' time.

Houses can suffer from maintenance problems as well. But the problem with modern flats goes deeper.

Firstly, to meet higher technical standards, particularly around environmental performance and fire safety, new flats have become increasingly complex and costly to build and maintain – especially as they get taller - because of access issues and performance requirements – around structure, cladding and environmental services - which increase with height.

Secondly, our system of leasehold ownership might work OK for small mansion blocks, but it is incompatible with the big dense blocks we are building today. Our industry sells 250- or 999-year leaseholds on buildings, which are going to need major component replacement from around year 25 - with the cost falling on the leaseholders. Few buyers think about this, and there is no obligation on developers, solicitors or mortgage advisors to warn them. Imagine getting 100 or more residents in a block to agree to major unexpected costs, which many cannot afford. The current cladding crisis is only the start.

Meanwhile, what of Muthesius's prediction that flats make a poor investment? Well, estate agent David Salvi points out that resales of high-rise flats completed since 2014 were trading eight years later at less than the original sales price.

Build to Rent offers a better short-term solution, but business plans typically stretch to 20 years or so, and the same question of who will pick up the long-term costs still applies.

So, what's so great about houses?

Privacy and amenity. *I suppose it's the vision of your own front door and your own back garden which most attracts those wistful flat dwellers who dream of a house.*

Simplicity and Economy. *Houses are simpler and cheaper than flats to build and to maintain. QS Chris Martin tells me that a mid-rise flat costs around 85% more to construct than a townhouse of equivalent size.*

Environmental impact. *A typical flat embodies at least twice as much carbon as a standard house. Using innovative construction for both could increase that gap to four or five times – because houses are easier to decarbonise, using bio-based materials, and do not require large, carbon intensive structural frames.*

Control. *Whether you are an owner or a renter, you don't have to contend with common parts, with leaks from the people above or noise from the ones below. (I admit you may still suffer from the neighbour from hell the other side of the party wall, but at least you don't have to share the lift with him).*

Remodelling and expansion. *If you are an owner, you can rip the insides out and completely remodel – how many architects in the audience have done that? And you can expand – upwards, backwards and sideways (if you have a side). I love those suburban train journeys, which expose all those back extensions – conservative, stylish, makeshift or plain bizarre.*

Adaptability. *And we don't just do it once. One family I know has remodelled three times: to accommodate three young children, two careers and a nanny; to provide semi-privacy for teenagers; and now to suit semi-retirement for music-loving bibliophile empty-nesters. Now that's a Lifetime Home.*

Change of use. *Until the industrial revolution and, from the 1850s, the development of flatted dwellings for the industrious working class, business was carried out from houses. Try reading any Dickens novel, like The Old Curiosity Shop. When I joined PTE we worked from a converted house in Colebrooke Row, Islington – with a stylish extension – which was then converted back into a single-family home and then into a rather sumptuous live work unit. Other houses on that street and all over London continue to enjoy serial changes of use.*

Ecology and open space. *According to the London Wildlife Trust about 15% of the land area of Great London consists of vegetated private gardens (down from 25%). Their ecology is richer than in many rural areas and they are London's lung, making a vital contribution to our health and air quality. By contrast, our book shows that some high-rise developments have contributed little or nothing to London's open space and ecology.*

Sociability. *Front gardens and front gardening provide opportunities for casual social interaction – and during the pandemic they came into their own for socially distanced doorstep encounters. Book-clubbing, hedge-trimming, gossip and produce-swapping – these cliches of the good life are precious everyday activities which create a context for a sociable society. You cannot reproduce that in a lift lobby or a carefully curated club room.*

Working from home. *Once we have expanded the house we turn to the garden, where the secret world of shed-land offers a haven for hobbies, a mini-warehouse for storing stuff and a micro-business HQ – especially for digital nomads and skilled professionals, but also for making stuff or maybe living The Good Life with a self-sufficient small-holding for apostles of today's anti-globalisation and Slow Food movements.*

'Sprawling Suburbs' versus 'Vibrant Urban Neigbourhoods'?

You may be thinking 'Well of course houses are nice to have, but there is an acute land shortage in London – and don't suburbs promote unsustainable sprawl?'

Following Richard Rogers's 1999 Urban Task Force report, London's housing industry has shifted direction from mixing houses with mid-rise flats towards almost entirely flatted development at densities and heights which were inconceivable 25 years ago. We have all bought into the desirability of clustering dense development around public transport nodes, and the London Plan turns this into holy writ. But maybe this has become old-fashioned received wisdom, and it is time for a rethink:

- *Our book examines some of the consequences of ever-increasing housing density and questions the sustainability of limitless upward growth.*
- *Yes, high-density clustering can support new services and revive existing ones, but the sad truth is that many Outer London developments are bleak dormitories, falling way short of the promise.*
- *For many people, working from home has permanently reduced the importance of living within easy reach of the workplace.*
- *Technology and home delivery bring goods and services to us, reducing further the need to travel.*
- *Electric transport is reducing pollution, and micro-transport is reducing car dependence and traffic congestion.*
- *Politicians are finally daring to consider managed and limited release of Green Belt. Reports show that over one million houses – meeting London's entire 10-year housing need - could be met by releasing just 4% of so-called Grey Belt land.*

Conclusion

The 'product' offered to first time buyers of new homes in London for the past 20 years is a standardised small flat carrying complex long-term liabilities - regarded by many as a stepping stone to something better. It's time to redress the balance by building the houses which lots of Londoners need and want.

Even if you are not personally quite at that stage yet, I urge you to vote for houses.

Let the cry go up 'Terraces not Towers!'

Lord Foster Flies to the Moon

Priory Road was a project to rehouse elderly housing association tenants in new homes to replace their experimental, but failing, 1970s flats. When complete, Tricia and Tim filmed interviews with the residents, and the film was selected for the Royal Academy Summer Exhibition. The adjoining big screen showed Norman Foster's film of a space station made from 3D printed lunar dust. I remember announcing proudly, at an exhibition we held soon after at the NLA, that Lord Foster had flown to the Moon, while PTE had taken the bus to Kilburn. So, that provides my title for this group of modest, contextual and popular infill projects, which connect recent development with PTE's roots.

Priory Road

West Hampstead *2007-2011*

Why retrofit is not always the right answer

Hell hath no fury like middle-class property owners, and our well-to-do neighbours here raised a huge cry against this modest infill development. They betrayed their true objection by referring to a ghetto of social housing, which was a tad insensitive given that the existing flats were built to provide affordable homes for Jewish refugees. One elderly resident stood up at the planning committee and declared that he had not fought in the Battle of Britain only to experience antisemitism here in London. In the pub afterwards, when I asked him about his wartime service, he laughed: 'ground crew'. (I have since read about the heroism of the mechanics, who kept our pilots in the air).

Today objectors would no doubt focus on the decision to demolish the previous block on the site, a highly innovative and hopelessly impractical Brutalist stack of hexagons containing cramped, damp and cold studio flats. Retrofit is not always the right answer.

We put back 56 new flats and houses making contrasting street frontages to this corner site and forming a U-shape around a courtyard garden. Most of the homes were designed with and for existing elderly residents and others provide rented family houses, and flats for first-time buyers.

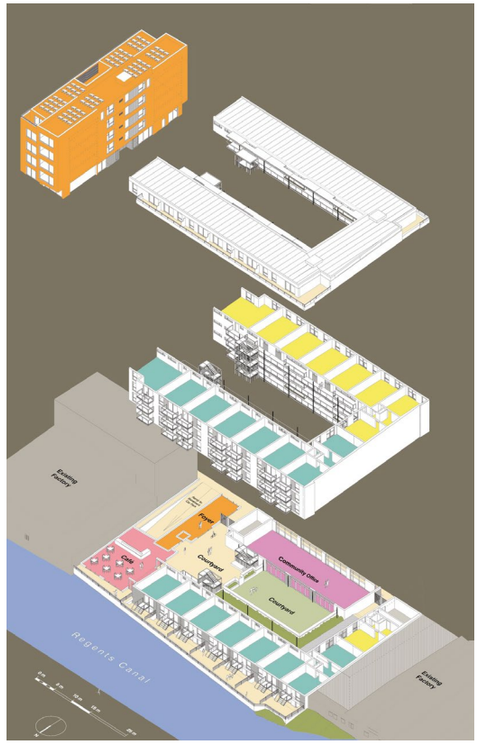
Kleine Wharf
Hackney *2001-2007*

A story of soap models, dot paintings and post-industrial chic

If you take a narrow boat from Fish Island and follow the Hertford Union Canal into Hackney, you will come to this project opposite Kingsland Basin, which we did for clients Places for People at the same time as our own development at Ironworks (page 96). Both projects explore similar ideas about mixed-use regeneration of redundant industrial land, including the use of deck access with industrial detailing to appeal to Hackney hipsters.

Kleine Wharf consists of a complex of canalside buildings around a central courtyard, with managed workspace for start-up businesses, a community police office, and a photographer's studio under mixed-tenure apartments. A waterside café draws people into the scheme. All this is very tightly planned, with the courtyard being around 10m wide, like our later deck access development at Wallis North (page 108).

White render and metal cladding were popular at the time, for their affordability and modernist appearance, but they have not weathered well, and we would certainly use brick today. A couple of years later we completed a little block of flats across the canal at De Beauvoir Crescent, using brickwork and industrial style metal windows, and this is ageing much better.



Kleine Wharf was, I think, the first project at PTE for future star and third generation leader Dominique Oliver. Mona Kvanka also contributed, with her trademark models made from ribbons and coloured translucent soaps – you smelled them before you saw them.

A little postscript about the De Beauvoir project sheds light on East London's creative arts economy. Tricia Patel obtained access to the adjoining warehouse to do a party wall award, and found it packed with art students painting signed copies of Damian Hurst's dot paintings for export to China.

De Beauvoir Crescent affordable flats, across the canal from Kleine Wharf

Jolles House
Bow *2009-2021*

Reviving streets in the sky

It took 12 years to build this infill development of 70 affordable mid-rise homes forming an L-shape around a landscaped public courtyard on an existing deck-access estate. Such are the vicissitudes of land assembly, planning and funding. Tricia Patel, Sarah Eastham and Mike Booth led different stages.

Jolles House is one of a new generation of deck-access schemes, responding to the London Plan's insistence on 'dual-aspect' homes providing light, air and views from two sides. Our exploration of the typology here fed into our book *The Deck Access Housing Design Guide* (2023).

One of the benefits of deck-access is that the walkways can provide social and practical spaces equivalent to the front garden of a house. Here we succeeded in creating private thresholds for plant pots, but we failed to install built-in seats: 'someone might sit on them!' cried an outraged planning officer. Meanwhile the fire officer scuppered our plan to put individual cycle stores outside each flat, to replace the cavernous and often unused collective stores demanded by the Plan.

A happy outcome of this protracted project was my friendship with the client Mike Nestor. I foolishly mentioned that I enjoyed hill-walking, and soon after found myself stranded in a snow-bound and marmot-infested shack in the high Pyrenees. We only survived through Mike's skill with compass and ice axe.

Jolles House is one of a new generation of deck-access schemes, responding to the London Plan's insistence on 'dual-aspect' homes providing light, air and views from two sides

Bradwell Street
Tower Hamlets *2013-2015*

How estate infill has displaced comprehensive regeneration

This project demonstrates the scope for small infill developments on housing estates, replacing under-used parking areas with affordable housing and public realm improvements. The 12 homes include wide-frontage houses with courtyard gardens.

As we explain in Altered Estates (2016) and Altered Estates 2 (2022), estate regeneration involving the replacement of existing blocks, has become progressively more difficult financially and politically. Therefore, small infill developments of new affordable homes on bits of under-used land within estates have become more common. For Bradwell Street we developed a new courtyard house plan, which provided each home with a secure and sunny walled garden. PTE's later Dover Court project, which has just won an RIBA London Region award (pipped by Crossrail for the top prize), extends this approach and architectural language to multiple sites across an estate.

Gladstone Village
Cricklewood, Brent *2011-2018*

New gateways to semi-heaven

These family houses reinvent the suburban semi-detached for modern lifestyles, including adaptable open-plan or traditional living spaces and courtyard gardens. Complemented by apartment villas, they are set in a beautiful, landscaped environment with views over the local park and historic pumping station.

I wrote about this project under *Gateway to Heaven* in my *Semi-Heaven* blog and lecture for the London Society (31 May 2022):

When PTE designed a street of new family houses in Cricklewood five years ago we started with a homage to the semi, but then persuaded ourselves that the space occupied by the side passage was better used to expand the ground floor accommodation. We reasoned that today people want small low-maintenance gardens more suited to barbecuing pigs than raising them. I now wonder whether our obituary to the side passage was premature, especially given the importance gardens took on during the pandemic – for those lucky enough to have one. How many flat-packed home-offices have been threaded into suburban back gardens to support the new normal of working from home?

Garratt Lane
Wandsworth *2015-current*

Returning to our roots with 'visible mending' of the urban fabric

190 houses and low-rise flats plus a health centre and pharmacy are spread across several council-owned sites and integrated within an existing townscape of Victorian terraces and small post-war estates.

Although the timeline for this project (still on site at the time of writing) does not quite fit my 2000-2014 era, I want to include it here because it exemplifies the durability of PTE's Visible Mending ethos. The surroundings are consistently low-rise, which enabled us to respond with very gentle density, including lots of new terraced houses, at a time when superdense blocks have been marching across London, including nearby Wandsworth town centre and river front. Sadly, there has been irresistible pressure to pile more flats on to the later phase, and I gather PTE has been replaced by architects who are 'less precious' about the quality of home and place.

Pentonville Road
Kings Cross *2011-2018*

Tall but not tall

A prominent corner site on the Pentonville Road between Kings Cross and Angel, enjoying views towards St Pancras Chambers, has been redeveloped with 120 spacious apartments, arranged around a landscaped courtyard and above a car hire centre and commercial studios.

This is a much taller and more urban scheme than the others in this section, but nevertheless a good example of contextual infill and New London Vernacular. The complexity of the site and brief and the high land and development costs, put us under a lot of pressure to maximise accommodation within a mid-rise (5-10 storey) envelope of four distinct blocks responding to three very different street contexts. One of the absurdities of the planning system was that we had to argue that the highest block was just under 30m (to top of parapet) to avoid triggering Islington's tall buildings policy, but over 30m (to top of lift shaft) to trigger referral to the GLA, which is generally more pro-development than the borough.

The flats, which are rather lavish and beautifully detailed, sit on a car rental office and depot featuring a double basement car store. One member of the planning committee declared that the council should refuse permission because she had once experienced poor service from Europcar, which did rather shake my confidence in the probity of local government.

Hamish Kilford-Brown led the planning for our old friends at Groveworld, and Heike Messler delivered the scheme for Regal Homes.

Rule by Standards

This piece is adapted from an NLA conference talk I gave in June 2009, responding to the following rather ponderous question: Delivering Homes for Londoners - Safeguarding standards in affordable housing provision: can quality be maintained in a recession? *Unfortunately I cannot find the slide illustrations, and so you will have to use your imagination.*

This is an example of a recent affordable housing scheme, which meets all the current standards required by the many agencies and authorities which have some kind of say in its creation – including those which develop, fund, build, manage, insure, control and police it.

Here are some examples of houses and flats which we can (hopefully) agree represent London housing at its very best.

The first example represents high standards. The second set of examples represent high quality. Standards and quality are not the same thing: standards cover important aspects of quality, but they are not the whole story. Standards deal with those things which are measurable and therefore susceptible to some degree of objective assessment. Quality brings in more subtle aspects, which resist measurement and assessment – those things which make us feel good about a room, a building, a street and a neighbourhood.

When the organisers of this conference gave me the title for this talk my first reaction was to dissect it. The logic seems to go like this:

- standards equal quality
- standards cost money
- money is in short supply in a recession
- therefore it is difficult to maintain quality in a recession.

My take on the question is a little different:

- new homes, and especially affordable ones, are required to comply with a growing body of standards
- standards do cost money
- because they are more-or-less compulsory, standards have the first call on the available money
- if there is not enough money around, something else will have to give way: that intangible thing called quality.

So, I would like to use these few minutes to say a bit more about standards and quality and money – and the relationship between them.

The rule of regulations
This was the title of a recent exhibition organised by Finn Williams and David Knight. It was an entertaining and thought-provoking examination of the unintended consequences of standards. It took one of the most famous examples of 20th Century model housing – Le Corbusier's Maison Citrohan – and systematically redesigned it to comply with current UK housing standards. The result is that a clear and beautiful idea is not just compromised, but transformed into an absurd travesty – Lifetime Homes gets a particular drubbing. (Now, I have to acknowledge that Le Corbusier is not to everyone's taste and that he has a somewhat tarnished reputation as an influence over UK housing – but you get the general idea).

Now, in case you are worried that this is going to be a rant against the dark forces of regulation daring to interfere with the creative genius of the architect, please rest assured that is not my purpose. All the standards which we have to follow have some origin in common sense and are ultimately intended to improve our lives:

- without the London Building Acts we might continue to suffer regular conflagrations destroying swathes of our city;
- without the Victorian public health laws we might be victims of cholera and typhoid,
- without today's Building Regulations we might experience frequent collapse of jerry-built structures;

But do we really need to be told how much space to leave around a bed so that we do not put our backs out when changing the duvet?

So, no rant, but certainly a plea to recognise the consequences of over-regulation and to search for a better balance between standards and quality.

Let's take a look now at the range of standards which we currently have to address – and you will see that the range is more of a prairie, or possibly a mountain. The following list is taken from the Employer's Requirements of a typical affordable housing scheme – and it makes very little difference whether it is a scheme for ten homes or five hundred.

Let's begin with the Design and Quality Standards issued by the former Housing Corporation, because this is what you have to comply with to obtain grant funding. It is hardly surprising that with all of this there is a lot of scope for overlap, confusion and at worst contradiction.

A few observations about the standards industry:

- It is relatively easy to create and publish guidance on any particular topic for which one has knowledge and enthusiasm.
- With good promotion and lobbying, guidance will be taken up and endorsed by clients and regulators.
- Once that happens there is a tendency for guidance to transform itself into mandatory requirements. I would put good money on the preferred items in the Mayor's Design

Guide ending up as mandatory items in local authority planning standards. This is because it is much easier for a hard-pressed and under-staffed authorities to apply rules than to make judgements. *(Note from 2024 – this is exactly what has happened with the London Plan making compulsory things which were previously advisory)*

- And once that happens it is very difficult to rationalise – and still less get rid of standards - even after their original purpose may have been superceded by other over-arching regulation or guidance.

An example that many here will be familiar with is the overlap and contradiction between the plethora of documents dealing with accessibility.

The Architecture of Happiness
Another borrowed title – Alan de Botton's book received rather sniffy reviews from architects, but is I think a very lucid attempt to summarise what makes us feel good about buildings and places. The authors of the Housing Quality Indicators wisely held back from trying to measure beauty, saying that 'there is little consensus on what is aesthetically pleasing and how to describe this'. However, thinkers and practioners have in fact always striven to define beauty and well-being and explain how to achieve them. Nobody really does it better than Vitruvius Pollio (active 46-30 BC) with his reference (in Henry Wotton's 1624 translation) to Commodity, Firmness and Delight. 'Delight' is the essential quality which encourages people to want to occupy a home and a neighbourhood, to care for those places and to want to stay there for the long- term. Without Delight the best we can do is to provide shelter.

I would like to talk now about some aspects of delight in housing, which, I fear, are becoming unaffordable, as quality loses out to standards in the competition for resources.

Window on the world
Much of the sense of well-being which we get from good housing derives from the physical and visual connections between the room and the garden or street.

A window and a door is not just a hole in a wall – it is the frame for a view, a filter for light, sun and privacy and a threshold between the private and public realms. Increasing regulation – around energy saving, window cleaning and crime prevention for example – makes it all too easy to forget that.

The spaces in between
Many recent low-cost housing schemes have miserable external space – the product of poor design, penny-pinching construction (always the first to be value engineered) and inadequate management. At the level of the community and the neighbourhood, the spaces in between buildings are more important than the buildings themselves.

At the detailed level, we need to pay particular attention to the discrete incorporation of parking, servicing, utilities and refuse storage. Too often these end up dominating the external spaces and leave little opportunity for greenery, let alone 'Delight'.

The joy of detail
(Nearly) every project contains some opportunity for specialness and surprise. Often that can be just a subtle detail - a projecting window, a hand-painted sign, the finial on a railing. Sometime the siting or function of a building, or part of a building, justifies (and demands) that it should be given more prominence: the entrance to a block of flats, a corner of two streets, a roofline seen from afar.

Maintaining quality over time
The newspapers are keen to point out that 'austerity Britain' is rediscovering the virtue of things which last, and rejecting things which are superficially impressive and quickly superseded by something new. In housing design, I think we are seeing a return to durable facing materials – and especially brick – after a decade in which render, timber and metal cladding have become the norm in London. If this is a 'recession dividend' it is to be welcomed. When housing managers call for low maintenance design and specification they talk from experience – listen to them. We must consider design, management and occupancy as an integrated whole, right at the start of the process.

The joy of detail at Woodside Square

2014-2020

Succession - Series Three

Having been selected by PTE's founding partners to carry the practice forward, we (Teresa, Steve and I) had always felt a responsibility to hand it on to the next generation and to create a 'succession practice' in which a strong ethos and collective endeavor were more important than any one individual. We started that process way back in 2007 with our first formal business plan, which gave a new cohort of associate directors the opportunity to prove themselves as future leaders.

We also realised that, much as we loved our work, there would come a point where our personal energy and resilience would start to flag. We did not see ourselves among those architects who work until they drop and whose practices die with them. The commercial success of PTE and our property ventures enabled us to plan for our own retirements at age 60 – in the event we each overran by a year or two, but we kept broadly to that promise.

Some of our potential successors chose other paths, starting their own small practices or solo consultancies, and we parted amicably: directors Dominic May and Roo Humpherson; associate directors Adrie Rensen and Philip Lee. From our own generation, Stephen Chance had announced a 'sea change' in 2010, becoming a micro-developer of experimental small houses; Judith Marshall retired in 2015 but continued as a part-time technical consultant.

Our succession strategy coalesced around six brilliant people: Carl Vann, Dominique Oliver, Kaye Stout, Patrick Devlin, Roger Holdsworth and Tricia Patel – and later around a seventh Mary McDonnell, in whom we finally found an outstanding financial and commercial anchor person. When we finally exited, and Justin Laskin joined the equity partners, PTE had, by merit rather than conscious planning, also retained a perfectly gender-balanced senior team, which is a precious rarity.

After considering various legal structures, we chose to create a new Limited Liability Partnership, move all the business and staff into it, and dissolve the company. This enabled Steve, Teresa and me to realise some value from the old practice, while reinvesting in the new partnership, and it enabled the new partners to achieve equity without finding large amounts of capital to buy shares.

I also want to mention some of the wonderfully talented people at the associate and associate partner level with whom I have worked closely on the projects described here, including: David Graham, Mike O'Rourke, Hamish Kilford-Brown, Robin Saha-Choudhury, Hoi Yat Tsoi, Sarah Eastham, Adrie Rensen, Ben Whitehead, Peter van der Zwam – and to apologise to those I have forgotten to name.

The conversion happened at the end of November 2014, and in February I went on a month's Himalayan motorcycle tour of Nepal, Sikkim and Bhutan. (If you want to read about this and other two-wheeled adventures see Overland Magazine issues 11,14, 29 and Adventure Bike Rider issue 78). For the first time in 25 years, since I had become a director of PTE, I managed to forget about the business completely. I grew a beard and on returning to the office felt like Reginald Perrin in disguise. I arrived to find everyone clustered in the courtyard to welcome Teresa back from the Architects Journal awards ceremony where she had been crowned Woman Architect of the Year. I felt incredibly proud of being associated with her and PTE.

PTE's second and third generation leaders, including the current equity partners

Standing from left: Carl Vann, Tricia Patel, Roger Holdsworth, Kaye Stout, Patrick Devlin, Dominique Oliver, Gabriella Gullberg (former practice manager). Seated from left: Andrew Beharrell, Teresa Borsuk, Steve Fisher. Portraits: Mary McDonnell and Justin Laskin

Planning Gain Lost

In March 2015, soon after my mini-sabbatical, I wrote this comment piece for The Planner (Royal Town Planning Institute magazine)

I have just returned from the Himalayas. As always, exposure to different cultures puts in perspective how we do things at home. I'm sure that Nepal has a planning system, but there is not much evidence of development control in action. By contrast in Bhutan every new building is required to be designed in the kingdom's traditional architectural style – an arrangement which, if imported here, would please our own royal architecture critic and outrage my architect colleagues.

Britain has evolved an extraordinarily complex system for regulating planning and development – especially in my own field of residential and mixed-use regeneration in London and the South East. Even the Buddha with a thousand arms and eyes is not so controlling and all-seeing. The National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF), the Red Tape Challenge and the Housing Standards Review have made admirable progress in cutting through the tangle of confusing and contradictory rules and processes, but there is much left to do.

Top of my list is reform of the way that affordable housing is procured through Section 106 legal obligations on residential planning permissions. I remember when the idea first entered into local planning policies in the 1990s with a typical requirement for 15% social housing on schemes of 25 homes or more. Over the ensuing years the targets crept up, the thresholds reduced and the cost per home to the developer increased as grant levels fell. In 2004 London Mayor Ken Livingstone famously introduced his 50% target, and shortly afterwards global recession made it unthinkable, except for heavily subsidised developments. Enter the Viability Assessment to save the day by providing a balanced and transparent way to establish the true potential of every project to deliver affordable homes and other public benefits.

It's not working! PTE deals with around 20 major planning applications a year, every one of which is an 'exception' requiring a viability assessment and the appointment of specialists to argue the case for both sides. The process has become so arcane and complex that its practitioners resemble high priests debating the finer points of theology – not least when it comes to the vexed question of 'benchmark land value'. We commonly see delays of a year or more, while fees, interest costs and frustrations mount. Often the concluding position is close to the starting one – all that wasted time could have paid for more affordable homes. The 2012 RICS Guidance promised to bring clarity and harmony – it has not.

Land prices are distorted and hard to call because bidders have to guess how future viability negotiations will fall out. If they factor in full policy compliance they stand no chance of securing sites, and discretionary vendors will withdraw from the market.

The system has fuelled mistrust between developers (who did not invent it), planning officers, councillors and the public, who suspect that the truth is being hidden behind professional dark arts and confidentiality agreements. Planning committees are refusing to believe the conclusions of their own officers and advisors.

We need some calm analysis of how the system is working and a review of the way forward. Viability assessment probably remains inevitable for more complex developments, delivering alternative benefits such as employment, major infrastructure or public realm. However, in principle, I would welcome a return to fixed non-negotiable targets for most applications. Targets would need to be location-specific, reviewed regularly and set at a much more realistic level – 15% of something is better than 50% of nothing.

Neo-traditional architecture is mandated in Bhutan

New London Neighbourhoods

The final projects in my PTE story comprise a series of large redevelopments in London, ranging from 150 homes to 1,000 or more. When my career began 150 homes was a very large project, and building heights for new housing were typically between two and five storeys. Now 1,000 home masterplans are common, and many include tall buildings of 20 storeys or more. When we published *Recommendations for Living at Superdensity* (2007) we defined a 'superdensity' threshold of 150 homes per hectare, equivalent to Westminster City Council's long obsolete red light at which planning applications were taken to the housing ministry for specialist advice. Today, densities ten times that can be found in London's tall building clusters.

Apart from Woodside Square, the projects gathered below are mid-rise, but they achieve relatively high densities in the range of 150 to 350 homes per hectare. Only Eastman Village includes some taller blocks, but even here most are below ten storeys. All feature networks of new streets connected into the surrounding neighbourhoods. The architectural appearance varies according to context, sometimes quite traditional and sometimes strikingly contemporary, but the urban design is based on traditional placemaking of street, square, terraced house and mansion block.

I am writing on the eve of the 2024 election, when the Labour party has just released AI-generated images (by a Tory think tank!) of what Labour new towns and urban extensions would look like – Edwardian Knightsbridge, apparently. It is disappointing to see the perpetuation of style wars and the attempted seduction of the electorate with unbuildable images of fantasy places, which completely ignore today's pressing issues of housing affordability and climate change. The projects below, and the rural and suburban case studies in our publication *Distinctively Local*, show that there is a richer way to meet today's challenges and create enduringly popular places.

On all these schemes I helped to win the project and worked on the concept design and planning, especially the detailed layout of the site and homes, but others should take most of the credit: Patrick Devlin, Tricia Patel, Roger Holdsworth, Justin Laskin, Domi Oliver, Kaye Stout, Hamish Kilford-Brown, Hoi Yat Tsoi, Ben Whitehead, Laura Marr, Daniel Parry-Davies and many others.

Woodside Square

Woodside Square (St Luke's Hospital Site)
Muswell Hill *2011-2018*

Responding to older people's desire for comfortable urban living

This micro-neighbourhood integrates 139 apartments for independent older people in new garden villas and restored heritage buildings, with 20 innovative family houses. Intricate design, exemplary placemaking and intensive local engagement overcame the challenges of landscape and building conservation, steep gradients and sensitive boundaries.

If I must choose just one legacy project, it would be Woodside Square. It's near my home, I walk past it most weeks, in all weathers and all seasons, and it always lifts my spirits. Maybe Diana and I will end up living there if our garden at Connaught becomes too much to manage.

It came about through the determination of Bruce Moore at Hanover Housing Association, who outbid major housebuilders for this prime site – no coincidence that Bruce competed in Iron Man races. We were also supported by the local co-housing group: sadly, their ambition to live on the site eventually fell through, but they left a legacy of the common house, for parties, yoga, book groups and more, and two blocks of individually designed flats. Some of these have quirky internal layouts, as do all the homes in the three converted heritage buildings, not least the main frontage of the central Listed block, where the 16.5m long oak-paneled boardroom became the living space for a lavish apartment.

The marketing agent was horrified by the 'pepper potting' of affordable rented flats within the same blocks as upmarket downsizer apartments, but this seems to have had no negative impact on sales or subsequent neighbour relations. Perhaps older people are more accommodating than younger neighbours, but I doubt it – more likely a benefit of small 'villa' blocks and good management.

The large, shared gardens preserved trees and intimate streets are only possible because nearly all car parking is banished underground. That is a costly solution, and today we would look to micro-transport and car clubs to reduce the overall amount of parking. The landscape architects were Farrer Huxley, and I have enjoyed working with Noel Farrer on many of the projects in this memoir.

Harvard Gardens (Aylesbury Estate)
Southwark *2011-2017*

Mews houses and mansion flats replace a notorious post-war estate

An intricate series of streets and garden squares has replaced part of the monolithic Aylesbury Estate and delivered 147 new mixed tenure homes, including 45 large family houses and maisonettes. The post-war estate was one of the largest in Europe. From the 1980s it became notorious for its high levels of crime and social disadvantage, and the London Borough of Southwark has embarked upon a phased regeneration programme, with the new homes at Harvard Gardens being among the first completions.

Chobham Farm Masterplan
Stratford, Newham *2008-2014*

New post-Olympic neighbourhood transforms a coach park into a public park

Close to Westfield in the post-Olympic regeneration area, Chobham Farm delivers a new family neighbourhood for Stratford. PTE's masterplan for the six-hectare site creates over 1,000 new homes and a new public park. The first zones (1 and 4) are providing 644 new mixed-tenure homes, commercial spaces and a nursery arranged around two new London squares.

Prospect East
Stratford, Newham *2008-2017*

A quiet refuge amid the train tracks and highways

Prospect East, the first completed phase of our Chobham Farm masterplan, delivers over 170 mixed-tenure homes, a food-store and café. A series of mansion blocks with winter gardens bring a new civility to noisy Leyton Road, mews houses line the railway boundary and family duplexes address the first section of the new park.

New Garden Quarter
Stratford, Newham *2014-2019*

Enabling families to live in the city

New Garden Quarter, next to Stratford and the former Olympic Village, is all about bringing families back to the city. 45 per cent of the 471 apartments are large family flats. From their private balcony in the seven-storey mansion blocks, parents can watch their children playing in the new London square below. The project is Zone 4 of PTE's wider Chobham Farm masterplan in Stratford and includes a new café, gym and neighbourhood nursery.

What the residents say…

‘You’ve got space, you’ve got greenery, you’ve got light - it’s an amazing place to live’

‘It’s all you could have wanted, and what you didn’t quite expect to get in London’

Charter Place
Hounslow *2015-2020*

Reinventing West London's 'streamlined moderne'

This former commercial site has been transformed into a residential neighbourhood with nearly 300 homes, local shops and a network of streets creating a new pedestrian route to Hounslow East underground station.

This is another example of 'PTE Rescue'. A fiendishly complex design for a supermarket with flats above was unpopular with local people, and our client was looking for a new architect with fresh ideas. We set out a very clear simple concept at the interview, and that's pretty much what was built.

Our design includes a row of mews houses with little courtyards, which form imperforate brick walls to the gardens of neighbouring semi-detached houses, providing them with better security and outlook. This is a device which PTE has evolved over the years to help overcome local objections, while providing popular family homes. Earlier examples in this memoir include Cherrywood Close and Zenith House.

Inspired by West London's art deco heritage, we adopted a language of horizontal ribbon windows and spandrels here. This works better for daylighting and overheating and marks a shift from the New London Vernacular convention of full-height classically proportioned openings, which had become the norm for the capital's new homes.

The main group of apartment blocks (see image overleaf) were allocated to an operator of private rental flats, and the scheme became one of PTE's largest forays to date into the build-to-rent sector, which is raising design quality and management standards, while becoming the default alternative to London's struggling market sale sector. Residents share a podium garden and street level foyer, café and workspace.

Charter Place is also a successful example of PTE's planning team, led by Tricia Patel and Ben Whitehead, handing over the construction detailing to our specialist Knowledge Hub team, led by Roger Holdsworth with project architect Rob Powell. As projects have become larger and more technically complex (and litigious), all architectural practices struggle with how best to structure themselves to deliver working drawings. Technical expertise is increasingly valued and more often separated from the 'creative' end of concept and planning work. The challenge is how best to give team members at all stages a sense of ownership and responsibility for the whole project.

What the residents say…

‘The development is just perfect. I love the parks, the inner garden, and the communal areas. We have everything we are looking for in an apartment. The design is clever, and the interior is perfect’

Eastman Village
Harrow *2017-present*

High density living, without high rise, transforms one of suburban London's largest post-industrial sites

Eastman Village (formerly Harrow View East) is an ambitious, multi-phased project on the former Kodak site in Harrow. PTE is delivering a complete new urban neighbourhood of over 2,000 homes plus workspace, retail and leisure uses within an outline planning permission previously prepared by others. The new homes include 40 per cent affordable housing, a new extra care facility and discount market sale accommodation.

Again, we won this project by analysing an existing masterplan, with outline planning permission, and showing how we could achieve more and better homes, at less cost, within the same footprint and height parameters, another demonstration of the PTE mantra 'get the diagram right and everything else will follow smoothly'.

Montgomery Wharf
Brentford *2021-2022*

Developing among Brentford's muddy waterways and old boatyards

Montgomery Wharf will provide 333 flats and 2,000 sqm of commercial space with extensive frontage to Brentford's historic high street and its network of waterways. An intricate pattern of alleys, river path and yards will thread through the site and connect it with the surrounding new urban quarter emerging around it.

This is pretty much my swansong project for PTE, and it is for a lovely complex waterside site – classic PTE territory. After my semi-retirement I was invited by Andrew Reid of Fairview Homes to compete for the job, and once again we won with a smart concept diagram, which showed how to achieve high density and good public spaces without tall buildings. The diagram had to flex a fair bit in response to today's protracted engagement with planning officers, technical consultants and Hounslow's design panel, but remained close to the original vision.

Anchor Works
Estate Way, Leyton *2015-2021*

Why it is so difficult to build new homes in London just now

The masterplan for 464 new homes and 15,000 sqm of workspace and warehousing transforms an impenetrable industrial site into a permeable high-density mixed-use neighbourhood, structured around a legible network of streets, urban blocks and landscaped open space.

I have generally excluded unbuilt projects from this story – there have been so many! However, this one illustrates some of the reasons why housing delivery in London has stalled.

We first evolved plans for this site on behalf of a major housing association and then directly for the landowner, a family waste management and skip hire business. Negotiations with the local council were glacially slow, partly because the existing use (although unsightly and poorly located in a housing neighbourhood) formed part of the wider regional waste strategy, and partly because we were required to engage with surrounding commercial landowners and prepare endless masterplans showing how their sites could be added into our scheme. Beyond that we had to satisfy the usual conflicting demands for 'no net loss' of industrial floorspace, 40% affordable housing and the many other obligations of the London Plan.

Five years later we finally had a scheme which everyone supported, and we duly submitted a detailed planning application – only to have it withdrawn by the client before it could be processed, because they had sold the site to another commercial operator, who will keep it as an industrial site with some new low-rise workspace and warehouses. What happened here, and on other sites across London, it that the planning obligations and related costs heaped on to residential development have become so onerous that they can only be sustained by house prices confidently outstripping construction costs – when that formula reversed (in response to Brexit, the pandemic and global economic uncertainty), residential land values fell. Meanwhile, so much industrial land has been converted to residential that the value of what remains has risen. So, after five years of effort and expense, it made better sense for our client here to sell the land with its existing use than to carry on with a major mixed-use development.

Invisible Branding

In 2017 we challenged ourselves to summarise PTE in a two-minute statement

Is it possible to have an invisible brand? We are an architectural practice with around 150 people and a fee turnover of £11.0 million. We are based in a converted timber wharf in Islington and we work all over London and the South East. For a large practice (24th in the UK) we are unusually focused in our territory and our sectors.

A prospective client recently described us as 'the best architectural practice I've never heard of'. The chances are that many of you will have passed at least one of our buildings at least once in your life. We have a huge map of London in our reception area, dense with pins representing 40 years of projects.

We specialise in the creation of new neighbourhoods and the revitalisation of old ones. We design all kinds of homes for all kinds of people – as well as schools and nurseries, health and community centres, shops and workspaces, places to recreate, exercise and enjoy civic life.

In the past two years alone, we have completed 1,900 homes and obtained planning permission for nearly 10,000.

So, we have been busy, but is it any good? Well, in the same two years we have won 38 design awards, and last month we were selected as Housing Architect of the Year.

Our work is little known outside our industry because we believe that most urban buildings should provide a practical and beautiful background to human activity – they should not shout 'hey, look at me'. Too many architects treat each project as an opportunity to advertise their difference, without due regard to what the client needs, and what the site wants to be.

By contrast, we're interested in 'Visible Mending' - transforming places by responding to context.

We recently produced a brand book for our people with 40 statements for our 40th year. Here is a small sample:

- Don't confuse novelty with innovation, or compliance with quality
- Challenge the brief, but respect the author
- Imagine what it's like to occupy the places you design, and never forget that every 'unit' will be someone's home.

Placemaking

(Knowingly provocative) contribution to Future of London's Placemaking debate - February 2017.

Public engagement in making places

Designing for the public realm is different from designing private or shared open spaces – or privately owned space which is open to the public.

In the latter cases you are designing for an identified set of users, and therefore you can and should be finding out what those people want from the space. You are creating and responding to a specific brief.

Fully public space - the streets and squares which everyone can access by right – provided they obey the law – is not like that. There is an infinite range of users – you cannot and should not try to cater for all their different specific needs and likes. And things will change over time. People will use places in unexpected and unplanned ways – like Londoners colonising the most improbable footways with café tables or skateboarders discovering that a particular kerb provides the perfect launch pad. So, public space needs to be durable, simple and accommodating. It should not be over-designed or cluttered with stuff or 'curated'. Public streets are not art galleries.

Perhaps there is a problem of democracy here – a default setting that public space should answer the majority views of the people who happen to be around when it is created. But think of the enduringly successful places in London – like the squares and terraced streets of the West End or the Royal Parks or Regent Street. These were created by forces we now feel ambivalent about: the Empire, the Crown, aristocratic landowners. And yet those patrons and their designers had the vision to create successful and popular places which have adapted and endured for centuries. Or think of the places we love to visit on holiday – when they laid out Baroque Rome did the Popes begin by asking everyone what they wanted?

Conversely, post-war municipal democracy produced the ring road, the car park and the shopping precinct.

Knowledge Hub

‘All successful practices have a core of knowledge and research at their centre. Those without knowledge will perish.’

For our first formal business plan in 2007 I drafted an essay with the provocative title ‘How Good is Good Enough?’. The aim was to define a shared quality standard for the practice. That required us to acknowledge that housing projects typically involve a combination of bespoke and standardised design, and that finding the right balance for a particular site, client and brief is key to a successful outcome. To describe this process, we invented the phrase Intelligent Replication (and contrasted that with ‘mindless repetition’).

Later we created a specialist unit within the practice called Knowledge Hub (KHub), which became a central part of the new LLP structure in 2014. Its role is to raise quality and efficiency across the practice by sharing information and helpful ‘tools’. This involves providing specialist advice to our project teams and clients (especially, but not only, on building construction and regulation); organising design review and technical audit of evolving projects; creating and maintaining a library of replicable details and documents; engaging in research and development. The mantra of Intelligent replication informs all these activities.

KHub has won some interesting commissions creating portfolios of replicable house and flat types for diverse clients, including national housebuilders, housing associations and even IKEA. I include a couple of examples below.

I spent a lot of my pre- and post-retirement time working with the wonderful team at KHub, which includes Roger Holdsworth, Tom Dollard, Heike Messler, Charina Coronado, David Mao, Rebecca Lee and other talented, and of course very knowledgeable people.

A Different Kind of Practice

Extract from my check-in to the Partners Retreat at Stoke Park in February 2018

As students I assume we all learned about the traditional dichotomy explored in Richard Norman Shaw’s 1892 essay: Architecture, a Profession or an Art.

I think that architects today, especially those engaged in housing, have a third choice: Architecture as Product Design.

Traditional practice involves working with a specific client on a specific brief for a specific site. This is professional consultancy. To a greater or lesser extent, architects inject into that process their own artistic or creative ambitions and cultural predilections. When there is synergy between architecture as a profession and architecture as an art you get good outcomes. When they are pulling in different directions you get bad ones.

Product Design is different. It involves:

- *understanding what our potential customer pool wants (although they may not know it)*
- *having creative ideas about how to meet customers’ needs and aspirations*
- *developing (and copyrighting) a range of products to meet those needs and aspirations - along with a distinctive brand*
- *thinking about the means of production as much as the end-product*
- *marketing and selling the products to customers*
- *varying the products to suit specific customers, provided that the size of order justifies it*
- *continuously improving the quality and range of products and the brand image*
- *scaling up for higher margins and better investment into R&D and production infrastructure*

Product Design avoids creating needless product lines and variations which compete with one another and waste resources in research and design time as well as production capacity.

I think that our customers are increasingly looking towards housing as a form of product design (even if they do not know it).

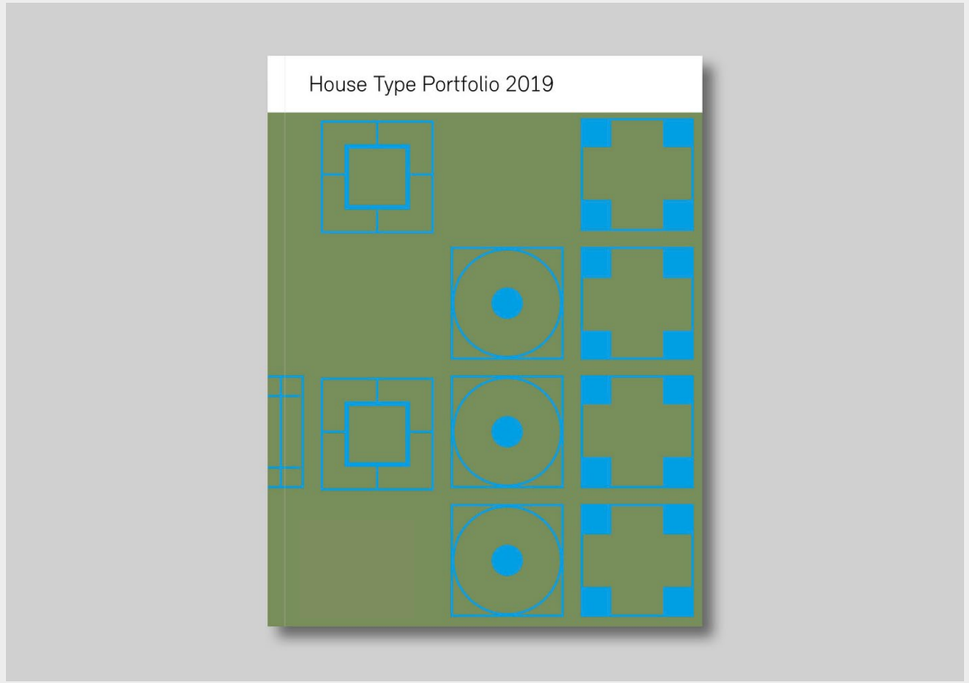
I think that PTE is unclear where it sits and where it wants to be in relation to Architecture as a Profession, an Art or Product Design.

I think that a significant portion of our work – but not all – would benefit from being thought about as Product Design.

Major housebuilder House Types
2018-2019

This was a great opportunity to help one of the UK's largest housebuilders to improve the quality of its homes, respond to customer feedback, meet new national standards and reduce the huge number of regional variations. They started by asking us to critique a typical new housing estate, which was an eye-opener for them and us. Many of the weaknesses (common to most volume housebuilding) came down to inadequate space standards within the home and the domination of highways and car parking in the public realm – both enshrined in a design process based on 'plotting not placemaking'. In my current role as chair of the Somerset Quality Review Panel I am trying to help address these issues on the many estates and urban extensions we are asked to review.

There is of course tension between nationally standardised house types and the aspiration to create places and buildings which are responsive to their local context, and this debate has flared up yet again, in the run-up to the 2024 elections, with Labour's publication of AI generated images which seem to imply, bizzarely, that their new towns and urban extensions will all look like Knightsbridge.



Bedrooms
Coltford Bedroom 1 is generous and regular, but Bedrooms 2 and 3 are poorly shaped and effective area is below NDSS. PTE Bedroom 1 is larger, with inclusion of dressing area and en-suite. Bedrooms 2 and 3 are regular shapes and meet NDSS.

Storage
Coltford contains approx. 0.9 sqm of full-height storage. PTE house contains 1.4 - 3 sqm equivalent, including utility cupboard.

7.2 Specification

Technical Brief

	PTE	TAYLOR WIMPEY
STAIRS		
Floor to floor height	PTE = 2850mm	TW current 2587mm
Riser	14 no. risers @ 203.57mm	TW current 13 no. risers @ 200mm (average)
Going	235mm	TW (average) 225mm
Stair width	850mm clear width (excluding handrail) - Part M4(2) compliant	Varies according to House Type
WALLS AND PARTITIONS		
External cavity walls	PTE = 383mm Generic external wall based on a standard masonry wall. 102/150/100/31. This also works with a timber construction wall with external brick facing – (102.5/60/140/25) Assumed u-value = 0.18 W/m2K	TW current 300mm
Separating walls	PTE = 325mm based on 25/100/75/100/25 This also works with a timber construction = 303mm (31.5/89/62/89/31.5). Achieving 45db sound reduction target as set by part E. *Note: may be advisable to go up to 50mm to allow a wider selection of products for specifying the insulation (100mm cavity) as 75mm cavity can only be 'loover insulation.	TW current ? mm
Internal partitions	PTE = 100mm	TW current 63mm stud, 12.5mm p'bd + 88mm overall
DOOR AND WINDOWS		
External Patio/ Garden door	Current options: - Door and side panel - French door To standardise	Door types to be discussed with manufacturers Sliding door too expensive? Bifold aspirational / quality issues with some
Front door	With side light where possible 1360mm Str. Op. with sidelight 1022.5mm Str. Op. for single door only Compliant with Part M4(2) min. clear opening width 850mm	Review TW standard types
Internal doors	Standard door internal = 826 leaf (910 SO) Metric for entrance level doors to habitable rooms and WC	TW current = Imperial

Outer London borough Suburban Study
2019

Good ideas sometimes lie around maturing for several years before being taken up. In 2015 we published, with HTA, *Transforming Suburbia*, which promoted incremental gentle densification of Outer London (see pages 51-57). There was interest from the GLA and various local authorities, but none had the resources to implement a pilot project until an outer London borough approached us to look at their huge stock of interwar semis and small blocks of low-rise flats. We developed a portfolio of new houses and flats which could be inserted into small infill sites or replace worn-out stock. We also looked carefully at the comparative financial costs and environmental benefits of remodeling versus replacement and found that 'deep retrofit' did not stack up. Sadly, the project stalled because of the borough's wider financial problems, but we live in hope.

Towering Tragedy

It is a grim subject, but I cannot conclude this story without reference to the 2017 Grenfell Tower fire, which continues to have a seismic impact on our industry. Here are a couple of articles I wrote for The Architects Journal (with help from Roger Holdsworth).

Fire safety in new buildings five years after the Grenfell disaster – The Architects Journal 17 June 2022

Any comment on the impact of Grenfell Tower on the design of new buildings must start by noting that its impact on the victims and families is still far from achieving closure. Honest discussion about how to improve our industry is clouded by potential litigation around who was to blame for Grenfell.

Furthermore, huge resources of time and money are rightly being targeted at making existing buildings safe – but not enough at rethinking how best to design, construct and manage new ones. There has been lots of discussion, debate and declarations of change– but much of it seems to amount to 'how can we adjust our familiar working practices to meet the new rules' rather than 'how can we transform the way we do things to create better safer buildings'. Let's look at three aspects.

Procurement. *Although we all pray that Grenfell is a unique one-off disaster, it has revealed bad and muddled practices which are commonplace throughout the housing industry. Among these is the debasement of Design and Build contracting (a good idea in theory) into a process where cost is king, and lines of responsibility are blurred. At a project level we have not noticed much practical change to the primacy of cost over quality, but we observe clients and contractors enforcing clearer transfer of risk towards suppliers and subcontractors, including architects. Meanwhile there have been some thoughtful contributions towards transforming procurement, including the Housing Forum's Better Procurement for Better Homes – a good start would be for government to insist that recipients of grant funding follow its recommendations.*

Quality control. *Cladding investigations following Grenfell have revealed the weakness of the process for certifying products and signing off work on site, including confusion in the drafting of regulations and the unreliability of the approvals process. We do see some improvements here: responsible contractors are employing façade consultants to check work on site, and are favouring suppliers (for example of cavity barriers) who also offer an inspection and certification service. There is much talk, in the context of the Building Safety Act, of architects resuming a site inspection role (much diminished after 30 years of D&B), but we don't see much evidence of that happening yet. Is the profession ready to upskill and take on this responsibility in 2023?*

Design. *The 2019 ban on combustible materials in the external walls of tall buildings was a blunt but necessary response to Grenfell. I have commented previously about the unintended consequence of incremental regulation, the risks of over-complex design and the need for 'whole-wall' certified construction systems– see AJ 4 December 2020. Government should now be reviewing and refining the Building Regulations to take account of legitimate feedback – this should include a reassessment of the use of structural timber in tall buildings.*

Grenfell Tower Enquiry – The Architects Journal 20 November 2020

The allegations against Celotex are deeply shocking. Up until now the enquiry has shone a spotlight on disfunctional processes within our industry, which have long been a cause of concern and which, in combination, led to the dreadful outcome at Grenfell. However, I never expected to read evidence of deliberate falsification of product information for commercial gain, with apparently cynical disregard to the safety of residents. This closely follows expert witness Paul Hyett stating that he was 'somewhere between disappointed and appalled' by the ambiguity in the Building Regulations Approved Documents.

What can we learn from these revelations to enable our industry to make better and safer homes?

Independence in research, testing and certification
The Grenfell enquiry highlights the need for a genuinely independent body to research, test and certify construction elements and assemblies, not only to remove any suspicion of undue influence from commercial manufacturers, but to step back and examine more fundamental questions around how we should build. Instead of working out how to deliver a particular product or technique to the existing market, we need to ask how we can build better in the future.

Construction detailing – you would not start from here
In the past 30 years construction detailing of houses and flats has become fiendishly complicated - in a saner world we simply would not start from here. The push to increase height and density of urban housing, coupled with stringent new technical standards, created a huge market for new products. Performance targets for thermal insulation, fire safety, acoustics, ventilation, daylight and other criteria often pull in different directions, and require designers to reconcile conflicting single-topic guidance to arrive at compliant solutions.

Complete building systems
More reliable quality may lie, for example, with a single source of responsibility for the entire wall from outside to inside – provided of course the system has been rigorously and independently tested in real life conditions. This approach is intrinsic to off-site manufacture, and it could become widespread for site-based operations also.

One implication of this is greater standardisation, and less experimentation and innovation on individual projects: architects may find this uncomfortable. Unlike prestige projects in the commercial and cultural sectors, very few housing projects can afford proper R&D with full-sized mock-ups – but nor can they any longer afford the risks associated with untested solutions.

So, an independently funded testing body, a radical overhaul of regulations, pre-tested complete building systems and standardised solutions – all these could help to produce better and safer buildings in the future. Alongside these we need major reforms to procurement, woven through with the golden thread of responsibility for safety.

Making sense of it all

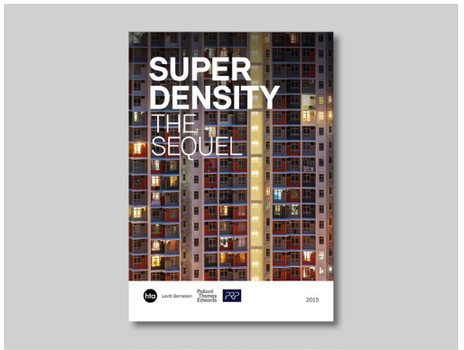
I remember my undergraduate tutor despairing that I needed to write less and draw more. I am making amends for that now by filling sketchbooks at every opportunity, but throughout my time at PTE I have balanced designing with writing and public speaking as a way of trying to make sense of our work and the world we are operating in. That process found new energy following a chance conversation with Ben Derbyshire, chair of HTA Design, in 2006. Always close competitors for work, we realised that we had similar views on planning, design and the housing industry, and that we should collaborate to try to influence practice and policy – we rather grandly called it 'thought leadership'. Andy von Bradsky, then chair of PRP, and Matthew Goulcher, then and now MD of Levitt Bernstein, soon joined our group, which we loosely termed Four Housing Architects (4HA). This has led to lasting friendships and many convivial evenings and weekends putting the world to rights. Ben went on to be President of the RIBA and Andy to be Head of Architecture at the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, which broadened our knowledge base and connections.

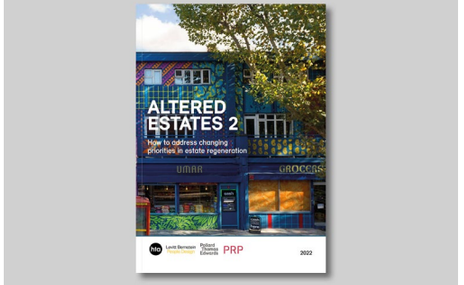
Our first publication was *Recommendations for Living at Superdensity* (2007). We then focused on responding to emerging policies such as the Red Tape Challenge and the London Mayor's Housing Design Guide, as well as promoting Home Performance Labelling and Space Benchmarking as ways to provide consumers of housing with more information to make better choices.

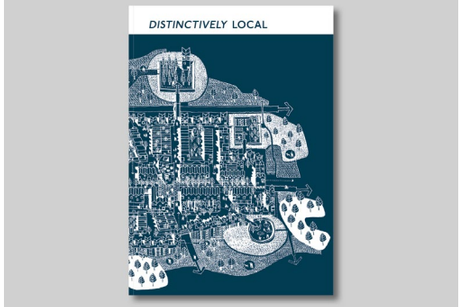
Between 2015 and 2022 we produced a series of publications, which achieved some traction and influence: *Transforming Suburbia; Altered Estates; Superdensity the Sequel; Altered Estates 2* and *Distinctively Local*. Other members of our practices started to contribute and for *Distinctively Local*, Stephen Proctor and Andrew Matthews joined the group. Most recently I have worked with a new set of friends and collaborators on *What is the Future of High-Rise Housing?* (2023).

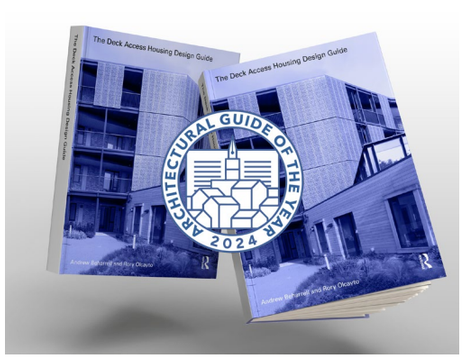
Part of my legacy before stepping back from a leadership role at PTE was to engage Rory Olcayto as the practice's in-house writer and critic. We had enjoyed working together, when he was editor of the Architects Journal, on PTE's 40th Anniversary monograph, and that collaboration has flourished with *The Deck Access Housing Design Guide* (2023) and now with the *House of PTE* oral history of the practice.

I stepped back from PTE in September 2020 after 36 years with the practice and over 30 years in a leadership role. I remain connected and in touch with my wonderful successors but am happy no longer to have any role in the business of architecture. I am doing a lot of design review for local councils, urban and rural, which enables me to see the process simultaneously from the points of view of developer, designer and planning authority. I have had lots of time to reflect on a lifetime in practice, which has seen enormous change in how we work, what we build and the places (especially London) in which we build – and yet many of the key issues from the 1980s remain unresolved: where to build and what to build, including the form, density and character of housing; procurement and means of construction; standardised versus bespoke design; planning by rules and planning by negotiation; consumer choice and affordability.









Making sense of it all – with a lot of help from my friends and colleagues

Andrew with Andy von Bradsky, Matthew Goulcher and Ben Derbyshire on an intensive thought leadership retreat in Puglia

Out of the Ordinary book launch at the German Gymnasium, Kings Cross 2005

AJ Supplement launch event at NLA, The Building Centre - More Homes, Better Homes 2014

PTE 40th Anniversary at Diespeker Wharf - Pop-up Opera 2014

London Planning Awards ceremony at City Hall 2013

Steve Fisher's Retirement Party at the Barbican 2016

Endpieces and credits

Endpiece - Mansions for the Many

I wrote this essay for The London Society soon after stepping back from PTE. I have always been fascinated by old mansion flats, and I have spent a lot of my career building new ones. I reused the title for my wider memoir, but here 'mansion flat' is used in the traditional sense.

The mansion block is back in fashion as an inspiration for today's housing. Phrases like 'modern mansion block' and 'new London vernacular' aim to confer a comforting connection with London's domestic heritage, even when proposals are bafflingly remote from the Victorian and Edwardian originals: I recently saw a 12-storey corridor-access slab described as a contemporary mansion block.

The precedent is better understood by the government-appointed Building Better, Building Beautiful Commission. In *Living with Beauty* (2020) they promote the mansion block as part of the way to deliver 'gentle density' and roll back the tide of high-rise. They illustrate their report with one of my favourite examples, The Pryors on Hampstead Heath.

We have previously calculated that the original inner London mansion blocks often achieved around 200 homes per hectare, which qualifies as 'superdensity' and is in the upper range of the GLA's recently retired density matrix.

The fact that we can use such the word 'mansion' today without blushing, is perhaps evidence of the popularity and durability of the originals, which were generally aimed at the more prosperous end of society – in contrast to 'charitable dwellings' for the poor, which adopted a distinctive architectural form and language, including deck-access tenements.

There is no commonly agreed technical definition of 'mansion block' or 'mansion flat'. Estate agents like the status conferred by 'mansion' and Wikipedia follows suit with 'apartments designed for the appearance of grandeur'. One of the earliest examples is Richard Norman Shaw's Albert Hall Mansions of 1879. Purpose-built flats for the wealthier classes were such a rarity in London, that the architect travelled to Paris for inspiration. Elaborately articulated and decorated street frontages with grand entrances helped to distance the new typology from 'model dwellings' for the working classes, which charities such as Peabody started delivering in the 1860s.

Albert Hall Mansions

My definition of a mansion block might run something like this: mid-rise apartment block, typically four to eight storeys, with 2-8 flats per level, usually arranged around a compact stair core. Adjoining blocks are often grouped to create a continuous street frontage, each having a prominent front door. This definition distances the mansion block from other common contemporary typologies: corridor access, deck or gallery access and point block.

Mansion Memoir

My enthusiasm for the mansion block began in childhood and was reignited by recent walks in lockdown London. My work, and that of colleagues at Pollard Thomas Edwards (PTE), has long been influenced by the typology. We have built many variations over the past 40 years and, I admit, often used the phrase 'modern mansion block'. These projects have provided homes for all sorts of people, from wealthy penthouse power-couples to disadvantaged families. In the late 90s we did a row of mansion blocks overlooking Victoria Park, and I remember that one local family occupied three separate flats: the parents were social renters, one adult daughter bought under a shared ownership scheme and one was able to buy outright. These were truly mansions for the many.

Here are some mansion block milestones on my personal journey, which also chart the changing character of London and show how the typology has evolved from exclusive to inclusive.

Sloane Gate Mansions

As a child I would be taken by train up to London to visit my grandmother at Sloane Gate Mansions in D'Oyley Street, round the corner from the Cadogan Hall. My grandmother Victoria lived with her sister Rita on the first floor: the bay-windowed sitting room and their two bedrooms overlooked the street, and the bedrooms were wedge-shaped to turn the corner. The hall was large enough to contain a mahogany dining table, and lunch was wheeled here on a small trolley from the servants' wing at the back. There were no servants and not much money. I was already fascinated by people's homes and intrigued by the complexity of my grandmother's flat with its original scullery, kitchen and sewing room.

My grandmother was born in 1898 in South Africa and sent to London on the White Star Line in 1920 to find a suitable husband. She married a former cavalry officer, who founded the Nairobi Coffee Company. My grandfather was a great salesman and a pioneer of today's ubiquitous coffee culture, obtaining wholesale orders from West End hotels. He died in 1957, and my grandmother lived as a widow for 33 years. She loved London and seldom ventured far from Sloane Gate Mansions: the world came to her, with a constant stream of visitors from South Africa and elsewhere. Peter Jones supplied all of life's necessities and Harrod's Food Hall the occasional treat.

London as an international hub and cultural melting pot is nothing new. I remember descending with Rita in the creaking lift cage, and the concertina door being held open for her by a polite young man in floral shirt, zebra-striped jeans and long boots - identified by my awe-struck brother as Mitch Mitchell, drummer to the Jimi Hendrix Experience.

My grandparents never owned property. It was more normal to rent in those days. From overheard conversations among the grown-ups I gathered my grandmother's rent was controlled and modest, and that she ignored all inducements to vacate.

Victoria and Rita lived in a time capsule. The furniture and decoration were mostly from the 1920s, with some earlier antiques. As they got older and money became tighter, the better pieces gradually thinned out: Victoria would mention casually that a nice young man from Sotheby's had been to visit. There was a sort of shrine with military portraits of my grandfather and his brother, who won a posthumous Victoria Cross in the final German assault on the Somme, with their medals displayed in a glass cabinet. Rita had designed lampshades and curtains for Fortnum & Mason in the twenties: there were lots of tassels. I was aware of the contrast between the front rooms, and the back rooms, which featured linoleum and 'utility furniture', which was mass-produced in plywood after WW2: I still have several pieces.

Gardnor Mansions

After my grandmother died, the few remaining antiques crossed London from Sloane Gate Mansions to Gardnor Mansions on Church Row in Hampstead, joining the treasures which my uncle and aunt had assembled in a lifetime working in the Near East. They bought the flat in 1963 and rented it out for most of the 30 years they were based in Cyprus, Jordan, Beirut, and Istanbul. They are still there in their nineties.

It is a typical mansion block plan, with a formal front room, flooded with light from its south-facing bay window, and then a long tail of back rooms, dimly lit from a small internal lightwell. A long corridor is lined with bookshelves and pictures: we tend to regard circulation today as a waste of space, but mansion flats demonstrate that it can make a positive contribution to domestic character and utility. My uncle's flat, like my grandmother's, was built with a miniature service wing at the back, and this converted seamlessly into a self-contained micro-flat for a lodger.

Gardnor Mansions consists of 20 flats in two adjoining blocks built in 1898 and slotted into one of Hampstead's oldest streets. They are taller than the adjoining early Georgian houses, and the Queen Anne Revival orange brickwork may have seemed a little brash when new, but time has harmonised the mansions with their neighbours. There are no lifts to serve the five storeys plus semi-basement, which even today would be costly for such small blocks, but this enables just two flats per landing, with every flat enjoying the full depth of the building.

The small size of the blocks, and generous design of the stair and landings, makes Gardnor Mansions a very neighbourly place: everyone seems to know everyone else, despite nearly every household being from a different country of origin – or perhaps the global mix actually promotes interest in and courtesy towards neighbours. During the pandemic, several people in the block are looking out for my elderly relatives and providing practical help with

shopping. The lobby name boards, identifying each resident and whether they are in or out, are a symbol of trust and openness: should we reintroduce them to modern apartment blocks?

Tower and York Houses
My first major job as a newly qualified project architect in 1985 was the remodelling of a pair of mansion blocks in Candover Street and Riding House Street on the Howard de Walden estate.

Tower and York Houses were designed by Herbert Fuller-Clark in 1903 to house respectable clerks of modest means [iv]. The flats were self-contained, but tiny, with a sitting room at the front, bedroom, and small kitchen / pantry at the back. Overall size was 38 sqm (compared with today's national minimum of 50 sqm): these were the micro-flats of their day, a century before Pocket Living. They had a WC but no bathroom: baths were taken in a tub in the kitchen. All the original ogival mouldings, doors and built-in cupboards survived. Again, there was no lift to serve the two flats per floor over five storeys.

No expense was spared on the exterior, which features bay windows and stair towers with fine Queen Anne Revival proportions and red brickwork decorated with white rendered banding. The most striking feature is the green and gold mosaic advertisement for T J Boulting & Sons, Sanitary and Hot Water Engineers, which was also the developer. It is hard to image today a business having the sense of permanence to enshrine its marketing in mosaic or a planning authority agreeing to make an advertising hoarding the main feature of an apartment block.

Our task was to retain all the key features of these Grade 2 Listed buildings – or replace them with replicas where deterioration or fire regulations required – while updating for modern lifestyles. We took down the rear extensions, which backed into a deep lightwell, and replaced them with new bathrooms and kitchens. We also extended the stairwells up to access new shared roof gardens.

The blocks were owned by Community Housing Association (later absorbed into the giant One Housing). This was my first experience of resident engagement, and I was surprised that the tenants were not the downtrodden poor, but middle-class professionals: I remember doing bespoke interior designs for a journalist. As well as serving disadvantaged people, housing associations at that time provided rented homes for those on moderate incomes who could not afford to buy in London (and certainly not in Westminster) – what we now call the 'missing middle'.

The procurement and contract administration were also rather different from today. The contractor was a family firm with directly employed craftspeople, who knew how to build without being closely instructed. They tolerated being 'supervised' by an inexperienced young architect and helpfully corrected my more foolish instructions. The final account was agreed over a pub lunch, and the Housing Corporation accepted over-spend up to 15% of their already generous 100% grant funding.

Marsham Court
When I first moved to London as a newly graduated architect I lodged with a childhood friend: our mothers had met in the wartime navy, and his had later lived in Marsham Street, in what was then a serviced apartment, with meals, laundry and cleaning services available on site: rather like today's top-end build to rent developments, with their lavish facilities and service charges to match.

Marsham Court was designed by T P Bennett & Son in 1937, with Critall windows and curved balconies in a restrained 'moderne'

style. Its ten storeys, matching its opposite neighbour, left the narrow street and many of the flats in permanent shadow, but gave me the exciting illusion of living in New York rather than London. My little bedroom enjoyed a different hallucinatory outlook at the back: Edwin Lutyens's Page Street housing estate (1930), a rare foray into social housing for the master of the country house and viceregal palace. Keeping the deck-access form strictly rational, he decorated the facades with super-sized chequer-board squares of brick and white render, and these greeted me each morning a few feet from my window. From the fourth floor we could see the sky only by leaning out.

Marsham Court, and its many siblings in 1930's London, still just about meet my criteria for a 'mansion block', although the height stretches my definition of mid-rise. There are six flats around each landing, rather than the conventional pairing, but mercifully there are lifts. Another key innovation is the uniting of two cores at ground level into one entrance foyer, which was presided over by a terrifying ex-army porter, who was rumoured to have spent time in the military prison at Colchester. He disapproved strongly of my bicycle, which lowered the tone when I wheeled it through the foyer into the rear service yard. Unlike today's London Plan requirement for lavish cycle stores in every apartment block, Marsham Court had no facilities, and I parked by the bins. There was an upside to this: the service yard was shared with an up-market restaurant favoured by the political establishment, and in the summer months I would arrive home to observe the manager Germano dining early by the bins. His table was laid with linen, crystal and silverware, and the sommelier and waiting staff practiced their trade under his critical eye.

Residents enjoyed a discount in the restaurant, and we occasionally ate there. On one occasion my friend's lemon sorbet featured an unintended garnish of broken glass, which embedded itself in his tongue. Fortunately, the Westminster Hospital across the street had not yet been converted into luxury flats. We were seen to immediately and returned to finish our meal and cauterise the wound with brandy: ''I'm so glad this happened to you and not one of my more difficult customers''.

At around 61 sqm the flats were compact and closely pre-figured today's national space standard. The small living room struggled to contain a full-length Edwardian portrait of my landlord's formidable grandmother on her wedding day. On 29 July 1981 a dozen friends clustered around our little Sony Trinitron to celebrate the wedding of Charles and Diana.

Today's *London Plan* requires every flat to have a decent balcony, big enough for outdoor meals and lockdown cocktails. It was not always so: Marsham Court and the Edwardian flats in this story had decorative balconies which were not much use for anything except a few unhappy pot plants. However, we did have London wildlife: our caged budgerigars were assaulted one afternoon by an avian mugger (buzzard, I think). I was alerted by a piercing screech as the budgies successfully counter-attacked their assailant, whose talons were caught in their cage.

Albany Mansions

Given my early indoctrination into the joys of mansion flats, it is unsurprising that the first home I bought, in 1987, was in Albany Mansions on Albert Bridge Road, which, along with Prince of Wales Drive, overlooks and encloses Battersea Park. Prince of Wales Drive provides a spectacular cliff face of late Victorian architecture. The individual mansions – Connaught, Norfolk, Cyril, Overstrand, Carlton, Primrose, York et al - form a continuous five-storey frontage over one kilometre long, broken only by six narrow cross streets. I often quote this to planning officers who want to drive big gaps through everything to make it 'permeable'.

Albany Mansions is the same height, but with less assertive architecture. There are eight adjoining blocks, each with its stair and front door. Like Gardnor Mansions, flats are paired around the staircase, each having one good front room on the park and a long tail of secondary rooms around a lightwell. The same plan generates one-, two- and three-bedroom flats: the larger flats 'steal' rooms from the back of the smaller ones. In modern apartment blocks values increase with height. But with no lift, the first floor was the most expensive and the top floor much cheaper: we could choose between one bedroom lower down or two on top, and we opted for accessibility over space and light.

Around this time, the original 99-year leases were renewed on the great mansion blocks near Westminster Cathedral in Victoria. At around £98,000 for a two-bedroom flat, they were way beyond our budget, but we went to view some out of curiosity. At six and seven storeys above a half-basement, Morpeth and Carlisle Mansions are even grander than Prince of Wales Drive. They run parallel to one another, separated by a three-metre wide canyon clad in white glazed bricks to lighten the gloom in the back rooms. This arrangement is unthinkable with today's regulations, but it seemed an entirely satisfactory trade-off for the glorious street facing rooms.

Back in our bay window at Albany Mansions, we observed the Friday night cruise-past of classic cars, the year-round Christmas lights of Albert Bridge and the devastated park trees after the great storm of October 1987. When we were not participating in it, we could watch the twice daily switch in traffic flows along Albert Bridge Road, which was 'tidal'. Strange to imagine these days, but I often drove to work in Islington, crossing the river three times and dropping my wife near St Paul's en-route. The car would inevitably be parked facing the wrong way, and we had to launch ourselves into the on-coming traffic and perform a U-turn.

Woodside Square
We defected from Albany Mansions, and inner London, to raise a family in Hampstead Garden Suburb and later to occupy a PTE townhouse development in Muswell Hill. However, the pull of the mansion block remained strong, and our neighbourhood contains some fine Arts and Crafts examples. These inspired the practice's design for a recent local development for active older people, who want to live in tranquil surroundings, but close to a town centre and with easy access to the rest of London – perhaps I will end my days there.

Every flat has views in two or three directions and a large balcony on to a garden square. What is really unusual is that affordable homes, for rent or shared ownership, are completely integrated with homes bought by wealthy downsizers. 'Pepper-potting' of different tenures is usually resisted by developers and social landlords alike, partly for practical reasons of management and service charges, but partly out of an atavistic fear of conflict between the classes. But here social inclusivity seems to work fine: maybe older people are more inclined to love their neighbours, but I doubt it. I think it comes down to the intimacy of the mansion block, where everyone can know their neighbours and take ownership of the shared spaces.

New Garden Quarter
If Woodside Square is a model for older people living in London's suburbs, New Garden Quarter, next to Stratford and the former Olympic Village, is all about bringing families back to the city. 45% of the 470 apartments in this recently completed development are family flats with three bedrooms or more, and 35% of all the homes are affordable. They are arranged in seven-storey mansion blocks around a large new

London square: from their private balcony parents can watch their children playing in the square below. We filmed interviews with residents during lockdown, when the square was intensively used for (socially distanced) recreation by adults and children.

"The neighbours are really great… where we lived before we wouldn't see our neighbours in months, and that never happens here. There are quite a few other families we've gotten to know." Resident

The planning requirement to include larger homes, even in high density apartment developments is controversial. There is significantly more profit in one- and two-bedroom flats, which have been the preferred product of London's developers for 20 years and more. This is not just greed: more profit means more affordable housing and higher contributions to infrastructure and other local benefits. Some also argue that London's suburbs already have a large stock of family houses, and the time-honoured pattern is for people to move outwards for more space – although nowadays the search for affordability is pushing young families beyond Ruislip to create Generation Reading. Still others claim (in a throwback to the Victorian's tardiness to embrace apartment living) that British families simply have no desire to live in flats, unlike their less fortunate continental cousins, and that, when they are built grudgingly to satisfy planning requirements, 'family' flats are actually occupied by sharers and students.

Whatever the true status of supply and demand, the family apartments at New Garden Quarter sold well – and to families. PTE developed a set of new apartment and duplex typologies, specifically designed to appeal to buyers and renters with young children. Many flats have open plan kitchen living dining rooms running the full depth of the block, with outlook and balconies on both sides to capture sun throughout the day.

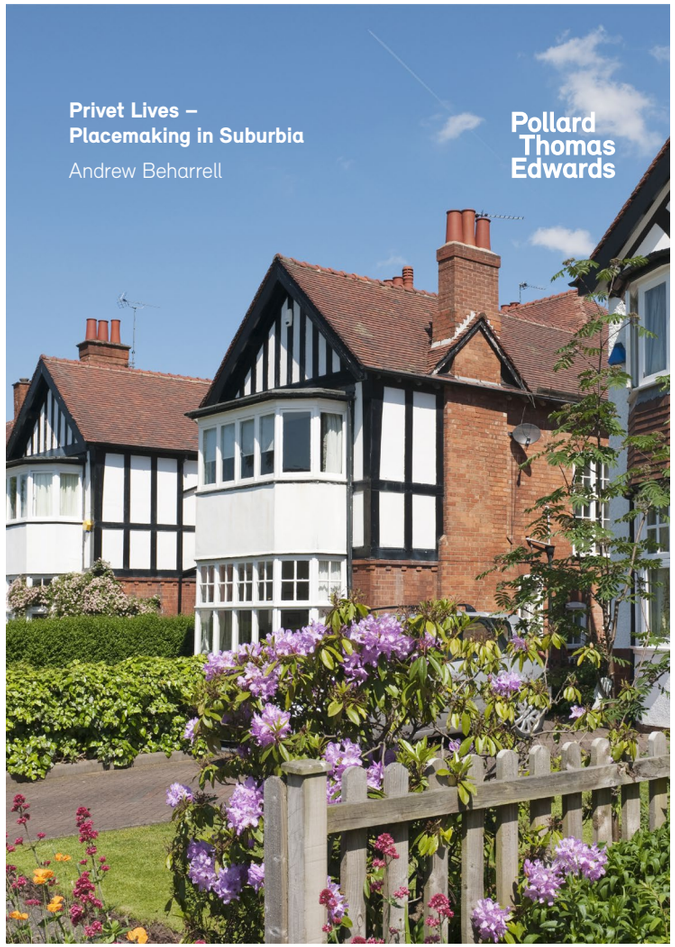
Lissenden Gardens
Although I have lived in North London for over 30 years, it took a global pandemic and the restrictions of lockdown to get me exploring hitherto undiscovered local places. One revelation has been Lissenden Gardens, between Gospel Oak and Hampstead Heath: two streets and a small square lined with dark red brick mansion blocks. They are quite austere, and carry the patina of age: it is like stepping into the 1950s, an effect which is reinforced by a blue plaque to R.H.Tawney 'Economic Historian, Christian Socialist and Founding Father of the Welfare State'. The place appears, in the best sense, to be completely unmodernised: the equivalent blocks in nearby Hampstead and Highgate have been primped and polished to shine in the windows of a hundred estate agents.

Developed in 1898 by Alfred Armstrong, an enterprising engineer who brought electricity to swathes of Hampstead, and owned by his descendants until 1972, the entire estate of 250 flats was sold to Frank Dobson's Camden Council following a campaign by its tenants, who then resisted comprehensive modernisation and remain guardians of its special 'genius loci'.

Lissenden Gardens exemplifies the durability, inclusiveness and quiet dignity of London's mansion blocks and reinforces my conviction that the typology should play a continuing role in providing great new homes and neighbourhoods for Londoners across the spectrum of income, age, tenure and household size.

Endpiece - Privet Lives

This unpublished article is adapted from a talk I gave to the Future of London Placemaking Conference in June 2017 – one audience member wrote a poem for me afterwards! I have it somewhere. It encapsulates my view that small things can benefit people's domestic lives more than large architectural gestures, and I would like to end this memoir on that cheerful note.



Discussion of placemaking tends to focus on the big successes and failures – we can probably all agree that Granary Square is great and that Euston Square is not.

But the lives of Londoners are affected more by the ordinary places where most people live – the suburbs. And it's on ordinary suburban streets that we find a really telling lesson in spontaneous place making – and the degradation of places.

In praise of ordinary places

Over five million Londoners (around 60%) live in the 20 Outer London boroughs

London's biggest building boom took place in the 1920's and 30's, with massive expansion of the suburbs around new commuter rail and underground links. The great architectural legacy of Metroland is the semi-detached house.

Metroland

The form was pioneered by the architects and planners of the Arts & Crafts and Garden City movements, and popularised by the developers of By-pass Tudorbethan. They all extol the merits of a house with its own front door, and gardens front and rear.

London's suburbs have been celebrated in popular culture, from John Betjeman to *The Good Life*.

London's unsung heroes

So, this piece is about the suburban front garden as a microcosm of place making – actually not even the whole front garden, but the privet hedge.

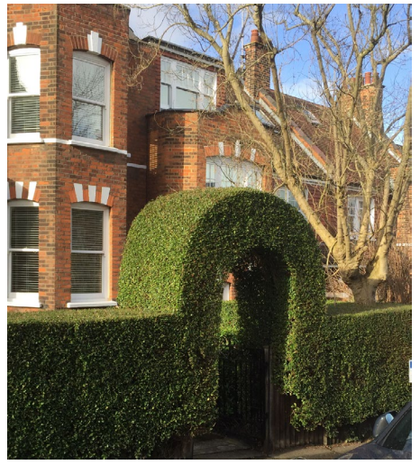
Inner London owes a huge debt to the plane tree and Outer London to *Ligustrum Ovalifolium*.
By my calculation, London's semis alone could have supported over 36 kms of privet hedging when built.

Obviously front gardens make the suburbs greener, but hedges do so much more than that:

LIGUSTRUM OVALIFOLIUM

PLATANUS × ACERIFOLIA

The front garden



A filter for privacy and view

The privet hedge provides privacy while allowing controlled views to and from the street. The degree of openness depends on the health of the hedge and the attentiveness of the gardener. In this illustration the hedge also offers a celebration of entrance.

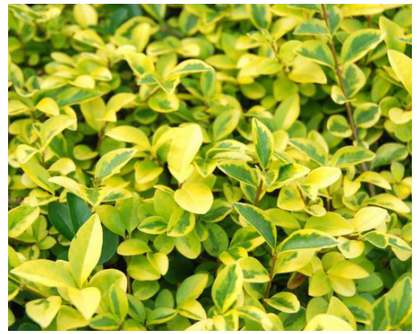
"The big thing about hedges is that they are right down at tailpipe level... catching pollutants on the leaves... to offer people in homes better protection"
Prof Prashant Kumar of Surrey University writing in Atmospheric Environment

A filter for air pollution

In January this year pollution levels in London overtook Beijing, and the Mayor issued the highest pollution alert - saying that the capital's "filthy air" is now a "health crisis".

Research by King's College for TfL claims that nearly 9,500 Londoners die early each year due to long-term exposure to air pollution.

According to Professor Kumar hedges can significantly reduce the exposure of residents to traffic pollution.



A place of social opportunity

On a lighter note, here's a challenge to the social anthropologists out there – let's see whether there is a measurable connection between front gardening and the amount of inter-action people enjoy with their neighbours.

A source of employment

For the affluent or the lazy, front gardens are an opportunity to pay someone else to do the hard work for you. The suburbs are alive with the sound of professional power tools.

173,000
gardeners employed in the UK (2016)

42,000
self-employed people in building and garden services in London (Office for National Statistics 2015)

Enhancing the nation's health

I have not yet found a statistic linking the health benefits of hedge trimming with the NHS budget, but I'm sure it's there somewhere.

A sanctuary for urban ecology

The privet hedge offers a five-star nesting place for birds and haunt of insects

A sanctuary for the orderly mind

Those of us who crave solace in pure form can find it in the front garden.

A stimulant for public art

Not as fine as yew or box, but privet still offers a willing canvas for the art of the topiarist.

Vision and reality

Sadly, the suburban idyll I have been describing survives mainly in conservation areas – while large parts of London's suburbs have become seriously degraded.

There are many reasons, including poverty, sub-division of houses and 'bin blight'.
But the main culprit is the motor car, and the unquestioning assumption that suburban living must be car dependent.

Quite apart from the visual damage and health impacts, the car has become an inefficient form of transport – congestion and air quality are just as bad in parts of Outer London's as in the centre, and 'peak time' continues through the whole working day and parts of the weekend.

The front garden

A car showroom

Car-cramming has disfigured the street-scene, destroying privet hedges and cherry trees. Whole streets of front gardens have been converted into car parks – or car show-rooms for our prized possessions.

Estate agents say that 'OSP' adds up to £50,000 to the value of a property. It is harder to value a beautiful front garden.

Perversely, every pair of crossovers for private on-plot parking spaces eliminates at least one on-street space. So, this is not just about having a car, but about the perceived convenience, security and status of having it on your own property.

Percentage of households with access to a car or van:	
England	**74**
Outer London boroughs	**58 average**
Inner London boroughs	**43 average**
Extremes:	
Sutton	**78**
Tower Hamlets	**29**

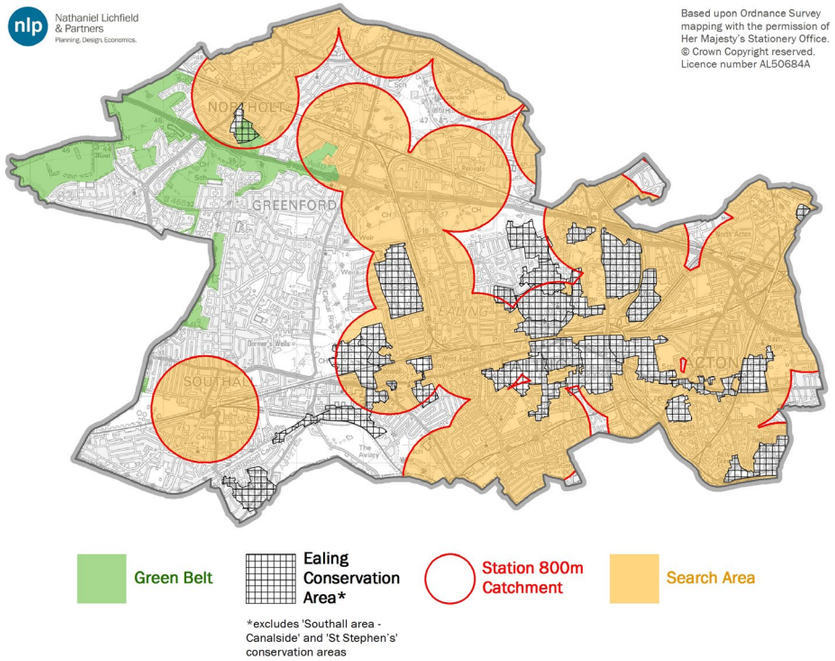
Car dependence is changing

Public transport

All this can change. 20 years ago, people living in inner boroughs like Camden and Islington took for granted the right to own and use a private car. Now it is a rare and expensive privilege.

For obvious reasons, the suburbs lag behind the inner boroughs. But Outer London can and will change. Around 40% of land in Outer London already falls within 10-minutes' walk of a local station. Here is some work we did with Lichfields taking Ealing as a sample borough: the land edged red is all within the catchment of existing stations.

Although Crossrail 1 will not add new stations in Outer London, it will massively increase capacity.



The way we live now and the Uber revolution

Social trends, powered by technology, are bringing goods, information and entertainment to our homes and changing our journey patterns.

Car clubs and the Uber revolution are offering cheaper and more convenient alternatives to car ownership.

"London should embrace new technology to make car ownership pointless" Lord Adonis

The way we live now and the electric revolution

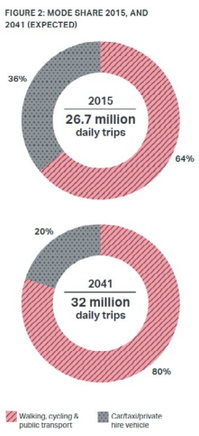
We are walking, running and cycling more – for convenience, health and lifestyle reasons.

Electric bicycles will get cheaper and better and attract many more people into cycling – especially in hilly North London where I live. There will also be an electric revolution in delivery vehicles, micro-cars and buggies for older and disabled people. There is huge potential for these modes to replace shorter car journeys.

"Over one third of all the car trips made by London residents are less than 2 km" Health Impacts of Cars in London (GLA September 2015)

Policy and prediction

Don't take my word for it - it's all here in the Mayor's newly published Transport Strategy. This provides evidence for the trends I have mentioned and sets out ambitious policies to accelerate them - including public transport investment, better provision for cycling, emissions charging and road user charging.



'The Mayor's aim for 2041 is for 80 per cent of Londoners' trips to be on foot, by cycle or by using public transport.'

Ligustrum Ovalifolium Resurgens

What can be done to revive placemaking in the suburbs?

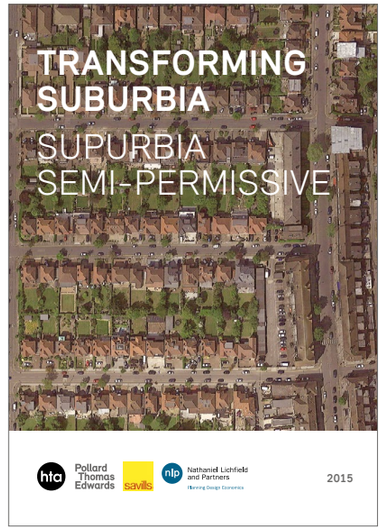
So, returning to my original theme, what can we do to encourage a renaissance in the suburban front garden?

- We should of course take advantage of existing trends, and also embrace the Mayor's Healthy Streets initiative.
- We should extend to Outer London car restraint through the planning system – restricted or nil-parking permissions for new development have been the norm in several Inner London boroughs for many years now.
- We should use planning conditions to promote proper front gardens in new development – with enough space for hedges and discrete storage for bins and bikes – not just an apologetic strip of concrete paving.
- Any chance of some modest grants to replace parking with gardens?
- How about a publicity campaign? Perhaps Joanna Lumley would welcome a new cause to replace the Garden Bridge.
- Let's invite corporate sponsorship of street improvements – perhaps more realistic than government grants – think of those lavishly landscaped French roundabouts.

And let's encourage people to do it for themselves.

This is a piece of work we did with HTA and others. It proposes Local Development Orders, Plot Passports and Permitted Development Rights to empower suburban home-owners to become micro-developers.

It shows how we could modernise the suburbs - update the building stock, increase the number and variety of homes, reduce car dependence – and retain the characteristics of space and greenery, privacy and independence that people value.



SEMI-PERMISSIVE

SUPURBIA

Reaching an accommodation with the car

How tragically streets are degraded when gardens are grubbed up to make way for parking. And how great it would be to reinstate them – what a difference to countless London lives and what a boost to placemaking in the capital.

Credits

With thanks to Chris Martin of Urban Movement
www.urbanmovement.co.uk

Featured publications:

Transforming Suburbia:
Supurbia and Semi-Permissive
by HTA, Pollard Thomas Edwards, Savills and Lichfields
www.supurbia.info

Mayor of London's Transport Strategy
(draft June 2017)
www.london.gov.uk

Health Impacts of Cars in London
(GLA September 2015)
www.london.gov.uk

London Suburbs by Andrew Saint
(Merrell Publisher's Limited 1999)

Ordnance Survey Map
(Crown copyright)

Credits

I have written this memoir partly to provide raw material for a separate book celebrating the 50th anniversary of Pollard Thomas Edwards (PTE), co-written with Bill Thomas, Teresa Borsuk and Rory Olcayto with input from other key people in PTE's story: Roger Pollard, Steve Fisher, Judith Marshall, Steve Chance. Rory is also our editor. Tim Metcalfe has designed this memoir, will design our collective book and has designed nearly all my previous ventures into print.

We call the anniversary book an oral history, and the working title is *The House of PTE*. That title, as well as referring to the practice's focus on house and home, is intended to make comparison with a couture house, where a succession of designers share the overall values of the firm but work on distinctive collections. As I have explained above, bespoke clothing is no longer a fitting metaphor for PTE's work (or any other successful housing practice in the UK). At one-point PTE's leadership team agreed that what we do is more like made-to-measure, and today the future of housing seems to lie increasingly with ready-to-wear.

Although the writing in this memoir is entirely my own, the projects are not. They are the outcome of teamwork, and it is difficult (and unnecessary) to disentangle who did what. These are projects where I had a significant role – the early ones as project architect and the middle-period ones as project director. After PTE's conversion to a partnership, there was usually another partner involved and my role was more strategic. (I have also included as 'Interludes' a few early projects where I had only a marginal role, but they make a good story). I have tried to credit other key people on projects, where I can remember – they are an important part of the story - but inadequate memory and record keeping mean that I have inevitably missed some people out. To them I humbly apologise.

Mansions for the Many
How to create popular homes and neighbourhoods

Andrew Beharrell joined architects Pollard Thomas Edwards (PTE) as a student in 1984. Everything was hand drawn on tracing paper or linen; communication was by post or courier; the practice had around 50 people and worked mostly on existing buildings; few projects exceeded four storeys in height; few people worried much about the planet; London's population and economy had been declining for four decades; property was cheap, and Notting Hill was a slum. All that was about to change.

In 2020 Andrew retired as Senior Partner of PTE, to focus on writing, design review and travel. By that time PTE employed around 150 people, working on large residential and mixed-use projects, many for 500 homes or more; London's skyline was populated by hundreds of tall towers; communication was instantaneous and deadlines demanding; all projects were digitally modelled down to the last tiny detail; everyone was focused on climate change and building safety; planning and technical regulation had become fiendishly complex; London was beset by the 'housing crisis' – actually several crises of supply, affordability, tenure and homelessness.

In this book Andrew tells the story of his personal involvement in 40 years of housing design and development within and beyond London. He does so through projects, writing and transcripts of talks – writing, research and 'thought leadership' has long been an important part of Andrew's work. Projects range from street house conversions to masterplans for new settlements and include everything that goes into a mixed residential neighbourhood: from affordable houses for disadvantaged families to luxury penthouses; schools and community centres; shops and workspace; parks and gardens.

Andrew's career covers a prolonged period of economic opportunity and confidence, barring a couple of short sharp recessions, in which London and southern England have been transformed. Just now our industry is facing many challenges, following the pandemic and Brexit, and in response to technological change and global economic uncertainties. At the same time, many of the key issues from the 1980s remain unresolved: where to build and what to build, including the form, density, and character of housing; procurement and means of construction; standardised versus bespoke design; planning by rules and planning by negotiation; consumer choice and affordability.

At this tipping point, architects working in housing need to reinvent themselves to thrive in today's climate. This is a suitable time to reflect on how we got here, what has changed and what we can learn from the past. Hopefully this book will contribute in some small way to the debate.

Andrew Beharrell